

Submission
No 57

INQUIRY INTO EMERGENCY SERVICES AGENCIES

Name: Name suppressed

Date received: 20 July 2017

Partially
Confidential

I make this submission to the parliamentary inquiry regarding the prevalence of bullying, harassment and discrimination, as well as the effectiveness of the protocols and procedures in place to manage and resolve such complaints within the New South Wales Rural Fire Service. Also, regarding the support structures in place to assist victims of workplace bullying, harassment and/or discrimination within the NSW RFS.

I make this submission on the basis that it be partially confidential.

Outlined below is my experience which demonstrates a culture within many NSW RFS layers, of condoning bullying, punishing victims who stand up for themselves, and poor processes to stop bullying or take any remedial action where it has occurred.

My husband and I are current members of a NSW RFS brigade which we joined in

In _____ I became aware that a member of my brigade was being bullied by at least two other members. One of those is the Senior Deputy Captain (a member of the brigade Executive). I told the Senior Deputy Captain in a private message conversation that I did not like the way the other member was being treated. I received a sarcastic reply.

The member being bullied lodged a formal complaint to the District Manager on _____ regarding the bullying and he received an acknowledgment of his letter the following week. No action was taken to stop the bullying. The bullying of this member included a formal letter on RFS letterhead which has been tendered in unrelated court hearings against this member by his estranged wife. This letter is still being used in court against him to this day, despite the NSW RFS having a copy of it and knowing about it since _____

The brigade had a General Meeting on _____ During that meeting I witnessed the worst public bullying attack I have ever seen. The hour-long attack that I witnessed that night commenced with a pre-prepared speech by one of the two original bullies, who also put a motion to the meeting of “no confidence” in the victim. There were no actual facts presented to the meeting, except a comment about a non-RFS related issue. Only one member of the brigade Executive tried to stop the attack. The five other members of the Executive appeared to support the attack and allowed the motion to go to a formal vote.

I consider myself to also be a victim of intimidation that night. The events have had a significant impact on my relationships and friendships. Many brigade members who I had previously considered friends have cut contact with me.

A few days later, at least five members (including myself) submitted formal concerns to the District Manager regarding the horrific bullying attack that occurred at that meeting. The appalling way the NSW RFS have treated this matter since then is something I never thought possible in the NSW RFS, or any workplace.

We were asked to sit in a meeting in which those who made the allegations of bullying had to sit face to face with bullies. No other members of the wider brigade were asked to attend. This made it clear to the bullies who had made the allegations, so any confidentiality was lost. The District Manager and two Group Officers were present and the only message to all those present was to stop talking about the meeting on _____ or talking about the people involved.

Another special meeting was held an hour later with the whole brigade invited, where they were also told to stop talking about the meeting on _____ and the people involved. Nothing was said that indicated the bullying should stop.

Instead, the bullying escalated after that meeting and continues to this day.

Apart from the initial acknowledgement of my letter to the District Manager on _____, I received no contact from the RFS about the allegations I made for over 3 months. On _____ I sent my original letter and a request for contact to NSW RFS head office. On _____ I was called by the Regional Manager who said that he knew very little of the matter, only what he read in my email of _____. I was shocked that such a serious case of bullying had not been made aware to him.

The Regional Manager said that he would make some calls and either he or someone else would call me back.

To this day, 20th July 2017, no person has called me back.

The bullying at our brigade continues. My husband and two other members who made the allegations in February have told me that when they attend the brigade they are completely ostracised by the bullies and by any members who are in support of them or related to them. People actually get up and leave the room when my husband or either of the other two enter. My husband told me that just prior to the commencement of the 2017 AGM in June, the brigade President told him that he's hated by every member of the Executive.

On _____ a 'moving forward' meeting was held at the brigade which was attended by all the bullies, some of their supporters and four members who made the allegations about the bullying. It was chaired by a Group Captain.

Passive bullying occurred from the moment we arrived and throughout the meeting. Three members who had made allegations were singled out during the meeting by the President who inferred they might consider leaving the brigade.

A member raised a point that there are several other members of the brigade who are now too afraid to attend the brigade because of the bullying behaviour they have seen. The Group Captain replied that they could approach him and he could help them find another brigade. Nothing was said about stopping the bullying behaviours. I am disgusted that a senior RFS member believes that the victims of bullying should be the ones to leave their RFS brigade to avoid being bullied.

I know that the NSW RFS have policies and service standards regarding bullying and a Code of Conduct and Ethics. However, what I have witnessed is that many levels of authority in the NSW RFS are willing to either allow bullying to occur or actually condone it. To date, I have not observed or heard of any action that shows any attempt by a senior member to stop the bullying escalating or spreading, nor to reprimand those who are doing the bullying or to stop the bullies increasing their control over the brigade.

The bullying was formally reported to the NSW RFS over five months ago and as no visible action has been taken at a brigade level to this date, the bullying is being allowed to continue. It is my observation that bullying is accepted in the NSW RFS.

It would really help if the NSW RFS contacted the victims and any person making allegations in situations like this to let them know what is happening and any timeframe for resolving the matter. I have heard from another member that an investigation has occurred regarding this matter, but I have never been contacted for any information. I may never know if it is resolved or if any action is taken against the bullies. Therefore, I cannot be certain that I will not witness such behaviour at our brigade in the future. RFS members such as myself at grassroots level need to feel confident that the policies and processes in place are actually working. We need to see swift action if bullying occurs amongst members of a brigade.