

Submission
No 115

INQUIRY INTO EMERGENCY SERVICES AGENCIES

Name: Name suppressed

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Confidential

Enquiry into emergency services agencies

Legislative Council of the parliament of NSW

Dear committee members,

I hereby make the following submission. The submission is a mixture of fact, opinion, supposition and perception. I say this as the way I perceive things to be may not necessarily be the way they are. However perception is very important and what I can say is that many of my colleagues have had the same experiences and perceive things the way I do. This perception comes with some life experience as I did not join the public service until I was in my late 40's

The submission will cover;

Bullying, harassment and discrimination.

The support structures and services

Uniforms

Relocation of the HQ

I will start with the last one first.

Relocation of the HQ to Orange Parkes or Dubbo

I fully support the recommendation of the parliamentary inquiry into the Coonabarabran fires which recommended that the Head Office or HQ of the Rural Fire Service be located in a country area. The government should have acted on this recommendation. I hope they will this time. There are many good reasons to do this;

1. This is something the government can do to reduce congestion in Sydney and stimulate growth in the country. The then minister just laid down to the excuses of public servants who stated that the HQ current location was "well placed in terms of facilities, utilities, communications, and technological infrastructure and proximity to major transport networks – and was purpose built..." well why do they want to move if it was purpose built? Well do we not have all that in Orange We have facilities we have utilities we have good communications networks (or have they lied to us about the NBN?) and the lease is up on the current purpose built site so why don't we purpose build one in Orange? The state already owns the old hospital land and it would be ideal for a new purpose built RFS and emergency headquarters perhaps even incorporating the other emergency services call centres!
2. We are obsessed with building bigger and wider freeways at enormous expense isn't it time to get serious about building an inland city? Instead of trying to squash more and more people into an overcrowded Sydney.
3. The current HQ has significant problems with parking and they have told staff that **there will not be sufficient parking available at the new HQ** for all the staff let alone other agencies and visitors during emergencies! WHAT GREAT PLANNING IS THAT ?????? only government public servants could come up with such an asinine plan and on top of that they have told staff there will **be insufficient desk space and workspace!!!!** It is like an episode of "Yes Minister" it is that ridiculous. And once they are there they are planning a 10 year lease! So we won't be able to correct this blunder for a decade if you don't stop it NOW! There is plenty of room for parking at the Orange old hospital site or another location, plenty of room to build and it is much cheaper!
4. Which location – it is the RURAL fire service so let's have it in a rural area to start with. I favour Orange (or Bathurst) because it is still close enough to drive to Sydney in the morning have meetings and return in the afternoon. Previously owning my own business I have done this many times.

5. It will show that the government actually cares about growing all of NSW not just Newcastle, Sydney, Wollongong. All we here is rhetoric about regional development but when the government has a chance to actually do something practical about it where are they? Moving the HQ to Orange will stimulate growth to the next critical stage.
6. There is currently no Bachelors degree available that cover all aspects of bush fire management the move to Orange could include the development of a much needed degree in Bush Fire Management, Emergency Management and Planning at the Orange campus of CSU.

Bullying, Harrasment and discrimination

One of the things that struck me most about the difference between the private sector and public sector is the difference in culture. There really is "something rotten in the state of Denmark" There is very poor people management and it surprised me how quickly people who are promoted are willing to join the club stay silent and tow the line. We were told by a senior manager if we wanted to get ahead not to be "purple cows" not to complain, not to get noticed, not to be innovative. I would never treat my employees the way we are treated in the RFS. The RFS gives out supportive employer awards but doesn't support its own employees being available for volunteer firefighting even for section 44 or declared emergencies. I have been denied release to go to both sect 44 fires and non sect 44 fires as well as having to fight to get leave to go to the RFS's own State championships! Or if released having to fight to get it and being made feel guilty or harassed about it. Despite the award allowing for leave and it being against the law for an employer to refuse leave during a declared emergency. Another employee in my area only this year was made to take recreation leave for attending a fire as volunteer when he is entitled to volunteer leave but he said he was to scared to argue with the manger over it for fear of reprisal!

I have personally been the subject of other bullying. I made a complaint to my group manager but not an official complaint as other members had told me that I would only make things worse for myself by making an official complaint. I was also thanked by the group manager for making a sensible choice (rather than making an official complaint). However I was satisfied that the complaint was dealt with satisfactorily. I did not expect to be the subject of bullying at years of age! To me this was extraordinary! It is the first time in my life I have had to take leave for stress. I was bullied in several different ways including in a matter of where I was forced to comply with something I thought was contrary to law and while I considered making a complaint under the protected disclosures act the matter could have been construed as a matter of professional judgement so I did not but while I offered to let someone else sign off on the matter as a difference of opinion they bullied me into signing off on it. If I was the manger I would have acknowledged a difference of opinion or moral objection and let someone else sign off. But this seems to be the culture at the RFS as evidenced by numerous other of my fellow employees who have told me of similar experiences and as evidenced by the "double-speak" named People Matter Survey (I'll believe it when I see it!) which despite being done for some years now has resulted in no practical action to remedy the situation.

A large part of the problem is that we have managers with very little management experience particularly outside the RFS or public service and very little training in management. A common practice is to promote someone usually a mate or by buggins turn and then get then to do a diploma in management internally. And no training in bullying or harassment and no training in internal processes or familiarity with the RFS or Public service award. The removal of an outside person in the recruiting process was a BIG mistake and has led to appointments as I said of favoured internal candidates or by buggins turn rather than by merit and I believe an audit of recruitment over the last few years would provide many examples of jobs where better qualified candidates applied. There are also appear to be numerous cases of people being appointed without proper process particularly in one

section at HQ. The audit department needs to include audits of recruitment processes. The GSE act has rather than allow greater flexibility and movement between departments of the public service and assessment of capability a practice of using the targeted questions and supposed capability assessments to ask technical questions relating specifically to the position or the job practices that only someone acting in the position or in that department would know thus skewing the selection in favour of the "pre-chosen" or favoured candidate. The fact that managers know little about the award or the RFS policies and procedures leads to inequitable application of the provisions and when one person gets there entitlement and another does not this can be perceived as bullying when sometimes it is just ignorance.

A good example of this is the government policy on all NSW public service jobs becoming flexible on an "if not why not basis" however asking for flexible conditions over the last few years has been denied and I finally made a written request but had to come up with "reasons" and ended up having to get a doctors certificate after a family crises before I could get a temporary flexible work arrangement with very strict conditions. So why is the RFS not following government policy? I did not point this out to them because I did not want to jeopardise the temporary arrangement which they likely just would have cancelled if I complained. Yet I am aware of certain favoured people having flexible arrangements without any conditions.

This may sound a little confusing but it is difficult to go into details in this context and while it is not about individual cases you can only speak from your personal experience and perception and provide your own examples. It is extremely stressful trying to write this and figure out what to put in and what not and relive those incidents in my mind even if the detail is not put before you.

The support structures and services

There do not appear to be any support structures or structures to make change unless it is involving critical incidents which is quite good I have believe.

The access to support services is very good I did use the outside provider for counselling and this was very helpful but limited. I then went to my own doctor and got referred to a counsellor at my own (and medicares) expense.

Appropriatness of uniforms.

I am not sure in what context you mean. The service has been working towards improving PPE over the last few years and the improvements have been good. The only area lacking improvement is breathing masks while there are better options out there no change has been made. However there is constant grumbling I hear about some people wearing operational uniform and some wearing office uniform. We see people in one section whose only job is paperwork in a business section wearing operational uniform while people in our section classed as under operational services who do site inspections and operate on the fire ground are told to wear office uniforms. This needs to be addressed.

Conclusion

Suffice to say I am not very happy working for the Rural Fire Service. While I have met some wonderful and very talented and caring, dedicated people who make up the majority I think we are seriously let down by poor management. It is only my love for the job and what we do that keeps me here. I used to have a copy of the RFS organisational values taped up on my desk wall. I have taken it down because I believe while they want staff to follow these values they are sadly not modelled by lower, middle or senior management. Moving the HQ to Orange may also provide a way of cleaning out some of the old style managers and renewing the service with a new and better culture.