

Submission
No 117

INQUIRY INTO EMERGENCY SERVICES AGENCIES

Name: Name suppressed

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Partially
Confidential

23rd July 2017

I joined the NSW Fire Brigades in 20 .

I remained at this station for the next years, and throughout this time experienced an “alpha male”, racist, homophobic, misogynistic culture. At numerous times I was the target of bullying and harassment by senior firefighters on shift, as well as direct supervisors.

I initially felt as though the job that I had joined was the best job in the world, however after working in this toxic environment I experienced high levels of anxiety. I felt as though everything I did was being watched or analysed, and that I could never do anything right. I was, on occasion, harassed on social media. I couldn't wait to leave the station after shifts, and dreaded returning.

I frequently had my sexuality questioned, and was called a “poof”, “fag”, “homo” by senior firefighters and direct supervisors on an almost daily basis.

In the only interaction I have had with the Professional Standards and Conduct Officer(PSCO),

Although perhaps an attempt at humour, I found this behaviour appalling. This incident heavily influenced my decision to avoid reporting any bullying and harassment, and discouraged me from engaging any of the support programs provided by NSW Fire Brigades/Fire Rescue NSW.

I reflected for some time as to whether it was appropriate or necessary to divulge my sexuality in this submission, but I believe it is important in the context of this inquiry. I identify as a heterosexual male, and at the time of the bullying, was aged years old. I can only imagine how incredibly difficult and damaging this period would have been if I identified as anything other than this.

Also pertinent to this submission is the fact that I have only ever worked in male dominated industries.

I have been exposed to “tough training”, practical jokes, a “boys club” culture, and hazing within all of these roles. I have never had an issue with any of this, and whilst I don't necessarily condone this behaviour, I was unaffected by it, and believe that I have a high level of resilience in these situations. The kind of insidious harassment I experienced within NSW Fire Brigades/FRNSW went beyond the aforementioned behaviours and I believe was part of an effort to “take me down a peg”.

Although there are several anti bullying and harassment policies in place, I believe these to be tokenistic in nature. I don't believe that they discourage bullying and harassment, but rather aim to support somebody that has been the subject of it. Personally, I would find it difficult to put my hand up and say that I was subjected to this behaviour, as I refuse to identify as a victim. I believe that it should be the responsibility of Fire & Rescue NSW to provide me with a safe workplace where this behaviour is not tolerated.

In my opinion the mandatory "Straight talk" program that all firefighters were required to participate in was farcical. It seemed to be a reactionary initiative to media reports of past instances of bullying, harassment and abuse. In my experience it neither stopped bullying, nor effected any cultural change within the organisation.

I do not intend to seek any form of redress for the bullying and harassment that I was subjected to, nor do I intend to access any form of counselling or peer support that is provided by Fire & Rescue. My only intent in making this submission is to improve the culture of my organisation, and hopefully prevent another firefighter from experiencing the same sort of bullying and harassment.

On the one hand, I am extremely proud to be part of a progressive organisation that supports diversity. On the other hand, I believe that the deeply ingrained culture is at odds with this. It seems as though there is a backlash against attempts to diversify the workplace, particularly the 50:50 male/female recruitments. I am a vocal supporter of this initiative as it has been my experience that the more diverse the workplace, the less bullying and harassment takes place. I believe this initiative is beginning to have its desired effect, and I look forward to seeing the remaining elements of the aforementioned toxic culture die out. In the meantime, I believe that a "top down" approach of stating that this behaviour is absolutely reprehensible, and will not be tolerated, needs to be initiated. The culture of bullying, harassment, homophobia, and racism needs to be quashed, and replaced with a culture of "the standard you walk past is the standard you accept".

Finally, I'd like to draw the attention of the inquiry to that fact that the email informing FRNSW staff that the inquiry was open for submissions, was only sent out one week before submissions were due. Furthermore, it seemed to be written in such a way as to discourage any firefighters from actually submitting a response, rather touting the long list of tokenistic programs available as some sort of measure of success.