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INQUIRY INTO EMERGENCY SERVICES AGENCIES

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Submission to the NSW Upper House Inquiry Into Emergency Services Agencies

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Introduction

I make this submission from the perspective of years continuous service as a volunteer with the NSW State Emergency Service and years as a volunteer with the NSW Rural Fire Service. Over the years, and in both services, I have witnessed and have been the target of several bullies. I intend to describe the two most recent events, one from each service, the most serious pertaining to the NSW RFS.

This submission focusses on the systems and processes that I believe both agencies, and in fact all agencies, need to review and strengthen.

NSW Rural Fire Service

Over a period of about three years, individual members of the Brigade were subjected to a systematic campaign of bullying and harassment by a , aided by his . Members were targeted, one at a time. It would begin with repeated sarcastic or snide remarks and glaring stares. This progressed into belittling comments to others, false accusations, then to verbal abuse. Commonly the victim would be caught alone and subjected to nasty and abusive verbal assaults.

Over the time in focus the Brigade lost at least ten good members as a direct or indirect consequence of this bullying behaviour. Some Brigade members expressed deep concerns about their safety in the field, and a few said they would not go onto the fire ground on the same truck as the perpetrator. At its most serious, at least two members had to seek medical treatment for severe stress and anxiety responses to the bullying.

In only two paragraphs this story might appear a bit light weight, but for those who had to live it, and manage the hurt and fear, it was significant. For most of the period in question I was the and I tried very hard to be the buffer and resolve the problem at the local level but, in standing up for others, I became a target myself. In the end I lodged a formal complaint and that is where I believe that the RFS let us down.

What I see as the major issue is the way that the whole thing was managed by the agency. The policies and procedures, as they were explained to me, and as they were enacted, left me vulnerable and ultimately more disturbed than before I lodged the complaint.

The key issues are:

- 1. No action can be taken unless a formal written complaint is made.** Even though the had spoken at length with the member having anxiety attacks he told me that he could not take any action unless that member made a formal,

written complaint. Because the member was highly distressed and feared repercussions, she would only make a verbal complaint. Unfortunately that is not enough.

2. **No member may make a formal complaint on behalf of another.** When I initially went to the [redacted] to report the situation he told me that he was not able to act because the member would not make a written complaint, and that I could not lodge a complaint on her behalf. My only option was to make a formal complaint in relation to my own situation.
3. **When a formal written complaint is lodged, it will only be accepted if the complainant agrees that a copy of the complaint be given to the person about whom the allegations are made.** I agreed to this requirement and my 20 page document was passed on. What I was not told is that there is no obligation on the Service to provide me with a copy of the accused person's response. This means that I, and anyone else in this situation, would be completely exposed to the very person causing the problem, but would not be entitled to know what stories the other person tells to cover their actions.
4. **If one party or the other refuses to participate in mediation, the matter goes no further.** Initially I was reluctant to participate because of my level of exposure. I was told that nothing more could be done if I did not attend mediation. I finally agreed, but on the day of the meeting the accused person refused to come into the room. I was told later that no further action would be taken. It has now been more than six months and I have not received anything in writing from the [redacted] in relation to my complaint so I must assume that the matter is closed.
5. **RFS Critical Incident Support Services (CISS) failed.** I got to a point last year where I really needed help. When I called the CISS number the RFS Operator explained that he would have to page them, and that someone would call me back. I waited 24 hours without getting a callback. I found a number for the CISS [redacted] and called him. He was very concerned and I believe that this failure in the system has been addressed, however there has been no long term follow-up or contact from CISS since the mediation meeting.

As a footnote to this story, it may be that things of which I am unaware were done behind the scenes. While the two people in question still hold Officer positions in the Brigade, one has not attended a Brigade activity for more than six months, and the other has only appeared two or three times.

NSW State Emergency Service

I don't know if there is actually an answer to this story. It is less about a lack of, or failure of, policy or procedure, and more about human nature and how easy it can be for senior people to ruin a career.

The bullying behavior began in earnest when the alleged bully began acting in the role of [redacted]

At the time I was new to the position of [redacted] and was attending Council's Estuary Management Committee, Floodplain Management Committee meetings and the Local Emergency Management Committee. The person concerned advised me that in future he would be attending those

meetings in my place, and that he would be attending all similar meetings for the other Local Units. Shortly after this a more senior person was put into the acting role. I questioned the change in meeting arrangements and the decision was reversed.

Each time the alleged bully acted in the role there were strange decisions. For example, we were informed that he would control all flood rescues. After a crew was dispatched to a Flood Rescue call the Local Unit was to hand over control to him directly. He would supervise the rescue and then hand the crew back to the Local Unit after they had completed the job. I asked how this was going to work when multiple flood rescues were happening at the same time, and what would happen when he was not available. I was told not to concern myself about how he conducted his business. Within a relatively short time we had an event with multiple rescues so he decided that if a second rescue came up while he was already handling one, the second would be managed by the local Unit. Then we had a rescue while he was on leave and it was handled by a junior clerical person at Region who had no rescue training or flood experience. Eventually the responsibility went back to Local Units but it was clear that I was going to be marked for special attention.

In short, I found that I was not always informed about matters that should have concerned me and my Unit. Opportunities and recognition went to other Units. There was also a lot of filtering of information and ideas that I sent to State through Region channels. At one point I sent eight separate emails, each covering an innovation, suggestion or question. No responses were forthcoming until I actively pursued them and then I was told that the ideas had been rejected for various reasons and I was diverted from the questions. There is obviously a lot more detail to all this but I will relate one incident more thoroughly because it was the one that led to a final showdown.

Our early flood rescues showed us that our ability to perform a rapid and effective rescue was hampered by the boats we had being unsuitable for launching in a flooded suburban street. I approached Region for an alternative boat and was able to take over an old flat bottomed punt that was surplus to another Unit's needs. Over a period of about two years I was offered two broken engines to go with the punt, both of which would cost more than a new motor to repair. After Unit members had done a lot of work on making the punt usable, it was condemned and taken from us without replacement. I tried many ways to resolve this issue. When I proposed using our Unit funds to purchase an inflatable rescue boat the alleged bully refused me permission to do so. I tried other avenues and was able to organise a \$20,000 donation but I was constantly frustrated by delays. In the end the donor withdrew the offer because the delivery time was too far outside their financial controls. I reported to the Local Emergency Management Committee that I could not guarantee the most effective Flood Rescue response because we did not have a fit-for-purpose boat. The alleged bully had attended the meeting and, despite being furious about my comment, managed to find me a brand new inflatable rescue boat two days later.

I was asked to attend Region Headquarters and was subjected to an extended interrogation covering a list of 'misdemeanors' going back years. Most of these matters were of no consequence or had been resolved in my favour a long time prior, however the person concluded by saying that my current term

as [redacted] was coming due and that it was unlikely that he would recommend my reappointment. I was not given a copy of the list of issues.

Present at the meeting was the substantive [redacted] who was returning to the position after a lengthy secondment to State Headquarters. He took diary notes that I have also never seen, and made no comment. He returned to State Headquarters permanently a short time later.

I was extremely upset by this event and stood down as [redacted]. I regretted this decision and when the position was advertised I applied. There were two applicants for the role. I was interviewed at 12:30pm and I was told later that the second applicant then went to lunch with two of the three interview panel members. I was not successful but have stayed on as a volunteer.

I apologise for the lengthy story but it was complicated and happened over a long period of time. I stood up for those who could not or would not, and became the target. The point that I want to make with this story is that when this sort of thing happens in the public sector there is simply no-one to whom you can turn. The system and those responsible for it close ranks and protect their own. Going over the heads of those responsible only brings more trouble.

Conclusion

I believe that there needs to be an independent arbiter. Somewhere in the Emergency Services or the broader Public Service should be a place where people can go with their concerns and feel safe and respected and that their problems will be treated confidentially and with compassion.

This independent body would have a clear set of policies, procedures and definitions with a transparent means of measuring or assessing the voracity of the matters raised. Suitable powers for investigation would be needed but I think it important that when a complaint is found to have sufficient grounds for further investigation, the matter is communicated, as a courtesy, back to the organisation concerned at the Commissioner level.

Should you require more information, I am happy to discuss this further with you.