

INQUIRY INTO EMERGENCY SERVICES AGENCIES

Name: Name suppressed

Date received: 21 July 2017

Partially
Confidential

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6. In dealing with this and other bullying issues within my business unit I believe that my own health has been deleteriously affected due to lack of management support and effective systems to deal with bullying behaviour .

7. It is my opinion based on my experience of working for the RFS that bullying is entrenched within all levels of the agency. Indeed it is perpetrated by the most senior Executive staff,

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9. Internally, the RFS is "run" by an informal structure which I term the "old boy" network. This network involves most of the senior officers of the agency, most of whom have come into the agency from fire control officer positions in various local government organizations

. Members of the "old boy" network appear to protect their colleagues and mates from any allegations by other staff. The high level of recruitment from the volunteer fire fighter ranks perpetuates this situation.

10. Bullying tactics are regularly employed by RFS executive members in formal negotiations with staff relating to employment matters. In the Public Service Association / RFS Joint Consultative Committee (JCC) and the Workplace Advisory Committee (WAC), the RFS executive position is always strongly adversarial and representations at the table are highly skewed towards senior executive staff. That is to say that staff representatives have to try and represent their colleagues in forums that always have a majority number of senior RFS executives present and negotiations are almost never conducted "in good faith". This has been the case for at least the last five years.

11. In the last couple of years the RFS has rolled out Code of Conduct training for all staff, and managers are required to ensure that all subordinate staff open the document each 12 months and certify that they have read it. However since this program has been implemented, I have seen no evidence that the incidence of bullying has decreased or that any behavioural change has taken place in the workplace. In my opinion this is because certain senior staff only pay lip service to the Code of Conduct and they continue to employ their normal bullying behaviours to achieve what they want.

12. The RFS has an excellent statement of values, which if adhered to by staff would resolve the bullying within the organization. Unfortunately the values that are espoused are not inculcated by management, nor are they acted upon by management, nor are they demonstrated by management. Hence the staff know that they are effectively meaningless.

13. While there are a number of support services available to RFS staff for bullying and harassment issues, there is a widely held belief that these are not totally independent from RFS management and hence if they are utilized for these purposes by staff, they may suffer adverse consequences for their career.

14. Policy formulation and development within the RFS is concentrated in a small number of individuals in Headquarters. It is my experience that meaningful dialogue and input into the development of policy is rarely devolved from these few senior staff in HQ. Accordingly there is a strong culture of HQ "telling" the rest of the organization "how it will be". That is to say, that policy development and implementation is centralized and strongly controlled by a few individuals in Sydney. Many of these people have only a limited understanding of the particular circumstances that pertain to the regional and more remote areas of NSW, where arguably the majority of fires occur. Regional and District staff are expected to implement new policy decisions and processes with limited discussion and often insufficient training and program backup. This is also a form of bullying, however it is pertinent to the Inquiry Terms of Reference (e).

15. Because of the Sydney property market, it is very rare for Regional and District RFS staff to be able to apply for and take up promotional positions in RFS Headquarters. Experienced country staff often do not want to relocate to Sydney for lifestyle reasons either. This results in senior policy and management positions being filled by staff who are already located within the Sydney basin and often by relatively junior staff. Often these personnel are limited in their understanding of rural and regional fire issues, and it promotes an "us and them" divide which is unproductive, as well as being inequitable with respect to promotional opportunities. A relocation of the RFS HQ to a regional centre such as Orange, Dubbo, Parkes or Tamworth would negate this issue and allow all staff to apply for promotional positions on their merit. In my view this would provide a positive outcome for the organization following the initial relocation difficulties.

16. The RFS is a quite unique and extremely effective organization that provides an excellent level of service to and protection for the NSW community in times of bushfire and other emergencies. The majority of its staff and members are competent professionals that I am proud to work with and acknowledge as my colleagues.

17. However the existing strong focus on promotion from within the volunteer firefighting ranks, the concentration of policy and implementation powers within a Sydney centric HQ staff, and the perpetuation of the informal "old boy" power network that exists across the organization, means that the entrenched systematic bullying culture will continue to operate within the RFS unless there is an external force applied which overturns the current senior management structure.