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UFU ACT Branch Submission Concerning the A.C.T. 2018 – 19 Budget

The UFU ACT Branch, representing the industrial and professional interests of career firefighters in the ACT, makes the following submission for consideration of the ACT Government.

As a registered organisation established pursuant to the Fair Work Registered Organisations Act, our objects include:

- To improve the working conditions and general welfare of our members; and
- To advance the efficiency of the services of fire prevention, suppression and extinguishment.

Consistent with those objects, we are pleased to offer the proposals contained herein.

Should the reader require further information or clarification of any matters we have raised please contact the writer.

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Part A: Delivering the ACT Government's election commitments.

ACT Labor made a number of important commitments in the interest of community safety during the 2016 election for the Legislative Assembly. Now re-elected, those commitments properly take place as commitments of Government, particularly insofar as the "Parliamentary Agreement for the 9th Legislative Assembly for the Australian Capital Territory" commits to:

"Progress jointly-committed investment in fire-fighting equipment, personnel and facilities" (Part 11, Item 1, page 8)

The commitments relevant to this submission, and the measures necessary to give them effect, are as follows:

Commitment:

"Recruit additional firefighters and run additional recruit colleges to address current staff shortages and replace staff likely to leave the service"

ACT Fire & Rescue (ACTF&R) is currently understaffed, and remains likely to experience significant staff turnover in coming years. While the funded establishment of ACTF&R is 348, of which 4 are administrative and support staff, there are currently only approximately 330 firefighters employed by ACTF&R, with a number of those on long term leave and unlikely to return to the service.

Even allowing for the next recruit college in early 2018, which will see up to an additional 18 firefighters graduate, likely retirements mean that ACTF&R will remain below establishment in 2018.

Recommendation

That the ACT Government commit to funding an additional 2 recruit colleges in 2018 – 2019, to maintain firefighter numbers at current funded establishment levels.

Cost: \$800,000 would fully meet the cost of 2 recruit colleges. In recent years recruit colleges have been only partially funded, meaning that significant training costs have been met by ACTF&R from within their own operating budget.

Commitment:

"Expand the fleet with an additional pumper-aerial appliance to complement our existing appliances"

The need for an additional aerial appliance is well established, and becomes more acute as the sole aerial appliance currently in commission ages and nears replacement.

A jurisdiction the size of the ACT arguable needs up to 3 aerial appliances in commission at any time, to allow for 365 day a year fire protection in the event of large incidents or an appliance being out of commission for repair. The commitment to an additional aerial appliance is welcome, and should allow for at least one aerial appliance to be in commission at all times. This need is underlined by the fact that the current 44 m Bronto aerial appliance was and will remain in regular need of repair and maintenance. As things currently stand when the Bronto is undergoing repairs Canberra is left without any aerial firefighting capability.

The cost of an appliance such as the “Combined Aerial Pumper Appliance” which is in use by the South Australian Metropolitan Fire Service (SAMFS) is approximately \$1.35 - \$1.4 million fully equipped and ready to commission. This is a fair indicative cost.

Recommendation

“That the ACT Government commit to funding the purchase of an additional pumper – aerial appliance to the value of \$1.4 million, with the appliance to be put into commission in 2019.”

Cost: Up to \$1.4 Million

The aerial pumper will require a crew of four firefighters per shift, and a relief factor which is currently 0.5 of the staffing complement. This would result in the first increase in firefighter numbers since the Platform on Demand (“POD”) truck was commissioned in 2014, resulting in the employment of one additional firefighter per operational shift. Prior to that, firefighter numbers per shift had not increased since 2004/05 when the Hazmat appliance was crewed full time. There has not been an increase in pumper crews since 1997 when Gungahlin fire station was opened.

Recommendation

“That the Act Government recruit and train additional firefighters to crew the new aerial pumper.

Cost: Approximately \$3.1million recurrent from 2018/19.
Approximately \$500,000 in training costs

In addition, in recent years the ESA has expended significant resources in modelling likely response times for a city fire station. The UFU has been informed that for this to occur, an additional site will need to be chosen and a separate fire station built. The 2017 – 18 budget allocated funds for a feasibility study for this to occur.

Building a new city fire station will create an appropriate location for an aerial pumper, with the possibility of further crews as existing infrastructure requires replacement. An indicative cost would be in the vicinity of that allocated for the rebuild of Belconnen fire station.

Recommendation

“That the Act Government fund the cost of a new city fire station”

Indicative cost; \$19 million.

Part B: Investing in Firefighter safety.

Workers compensation legislation recognises the inherent dangers of firefighting insofar as occupational cancers are concerned. The passage of presumptive legislation in the Commonwealth jurisdiction (and which applies to the ACT) was based on the knowledge that over the course of a firefighters’ career, he or she will attend many incidents and be exposed to thousands of carcinogens.

Presumptive legislation was an important improvement to firefighter welfare which means that if a firefighter suffers from a cancer which is listed in the legislation, he or she will not have to prove that a particular chemical exposure was the cause: it is presumed that the cancer was a result of their employment.

Important as it is, we would prefer that firefighters not need to avail themselves of their rights under presumptive legislation: we would prefer that firefighters live long and healthy lives from recruitment to retirement.

For firefighters, the last line of defence against carcinogens is their personal protective clothing and equipment, and an integral part of this is the structural firefighting ensemble (structural ppc). While all PPC is required to meet Australian Standards for use in Australia, there are variances between the design and construction of different brands of PPC.

Consistent with the commitment contained in the ACT Public Sector ACT Fire and Rescue Enterprise Agreement 2013 – 2017 to “promoting, achieving and maintaining the highest levels of health and safety for employees”, firefighter PPC should be of the highest available standard. This is aimed at minimising exposure to carcinogens, reducing the risks of burns as a result of flashover, and reducing exposure to radiant heat.

A rollout of new personal protective clothing should take place in as short a possible timeframe to ensure that all firefighters receive the same level of protection: it is unsatisfactory for some firefighters to receive lower levels of protection than others. A staged rollout of PPC would lead to differing standards of protection based on factors as random as a firefighter’s name being further down a list than another firefighter, and hence still using outdated or a lower standard of PPC.

Recommendation

That the ACT Government fund a complete replacement of firefighter structural firefighting personal protective equipment, to the highest available standard.

Cost: A complete PPC rollout would cost in the vicinity of \$1.342 Million.

Conclusion

The matters we raise are ultimately matters for government decision, and we would welcome the opportunity to meet and elaborate upon our proposals.