



Royal Commission into Family Violence

WITNESS STATEMENT OF STEPHEN PATRICK O'MALLEY AFSM

I, Stephen Patrick O'Malley, Multicultural Liaison Officer (**MLO**), of 456 Albert Street, East Melbourne in the State of Victoria, say as follows:

1 I make this statement on the basis of my own knowledge, save where otherwise stated. Where I make statements based on information provided by others, I believe such information to be true.

Current role

2 I am currently employed by the Metropolitan Fire Brigade (**MFB**) as the MLO in the Central District.

3 The role of the MLO includes the provision of advice and assistance on the implementation and monitoring of policies and procedures for diverse communities. Diverse communities include multicultural, linguistic, Aboriginal, the aged, people with disabilities and women's groups, within the Metropolitan District.

4 The MLO manages the development and implementation of diversity related projects and training opportunities within the MFB. The MLO will provide advice, information and feedback to Operational Command on identified and emerging risks within diverse communities and manage and coordinate the delivery of community resilience strategies in accordance with the MFB's business plans.

5 Most importantly, the MLO will develop and maintain links, partnerships and networks with appropriate external bodies and authorities. These partnerships must include, but are not limited to non-Government, social service and the not for profit sector service providers.

Background and qualifications

6 I have worked as a firefighter for 27 years. In 1988, I joined the New South Wales Fire Brigade (as it was then known). I then joined the MFB in Victoria in 1990 as an operational firefighter.

7 In 2006 I was awarded the Long Service and Good Conduct Medals.

8 In 2007, I moved from the role of operational firefighter to my current role as Multicultural Liaison Officer. I am still regarded as an operational member of the

fire brigade, but the role I am asked by the MFB to perform is in the area of multiculturalism/diversity. I am one of five such MLOs.

9 I am currently an Equal Opportunity Workplace Contact Officer and the Deputy Chair of Women and Firefighting Australasia.

10 In 2008 I was nominated as White Ribbon Ambassador by my friend Jane Ashton, an active campaigner in the prevention of violence against women since the murder of her twin sister Julie in 2004.

11 In 2009, I became involved, with a number of others (including CASA, Partners in Prevention, Women's Health West and Jane Ashton) in developing the Victorian Health Promotion Foundation (**VicHealth**) two day short course in preventing violence against women.

12 On Australian Day 2010 I was awarded the Australian Fire Service Medal (**AFSM**).

13 In February 2010, I commenced a Graduate Certificate in the area of human rights. I completed this in 2012 and intend to complete my Masters in 2017.

14 I hold the following qualifications:

14.1 Graduate Certificate in Human Rights (Curtin University); and

14.2 Certificate IV in Workplace Training and Assessment.

MFB

15 The MFB:

15.1 delivers fire and emergency management services;

15.2 drives systemic change to the built environment through reforms to building design, regulations and legislation;

15.3 invests in research; and

15.4 develops prevention programs that improve community safety and build resilience.

16 MFB's employs more than 2,200 employees. Approximately 1850 of these employees are operational firefighters. Of the 1850 operational firefighters, approximately 65 are women (approximately 3%).

Why it is important for MFB to be gender inclusive

17 Firefighters carry a privileged position within society; they are generally seen to be positive role models, and even heroes. The nature of the role we play as firefighters, much like paramedics, means we are always arriving to help people. This can be contrasted to, for example, the police – the police might frequently

help people, but they are also the enforcers of law and order. In addition, a lot of people have a connection in some way with a firefighter.

- 18 As a result, organisations like the MFB generate a great deal of goodwill and generally receive a high level of community support. It is extremely important for an organisation such as the MFB to model the sort of behaviour that ought to occur in the community.
- 19 This means employing a diverse group of employees, being seen to be inclusive, and modelling respectful relationships in the workplace (both at the fire station and in the public eye).
- 20 In the context of gender inclusion, it is not necessarily about women being able to offer different skills (although I think they do); it is about the MFB, as a leading and respected community organisation, being seen by the community to be a place where everyone is welcome and respected – men and women, Caucasians and non-Caucasians. If that can be achieved, it will send a message to and influence the broader community.
- 21 Operational firefighters spend a significant amount of time doing community work. For example, at various stations throughout Melbourne, the MFB hosts practical fire demonstrations for schools, kindergartens, pre-schools and other community groups on various days through the week. These displays can include demonstrations of various fire equipment including the Jaws Of Life, a presentation on basic fire safety and the chance to meet firefighters and see fire engines up close.
- 22 When community members attend these events, they are able to see female firefighters at work, and witness male and female firefighters interact. If these interactions are respectful and positive, and the female is seen to be an equal, I have no doubt that this will have an impact on the perceptions of those individuals.
- 23 In addition, many MFB employees are active community members. The nature of the job means that we are time rich; we have a lot of time off and annual leave. Many employees have involvements with sporting and other clubs.
- 24 Further, in my view, female firefighters can often offer slightly different skillsets to male firefighters, particularly in the areas of communication. The traditional understanding of firefighting being an extremely physical job involving heavy lifting is only one component of what an operational firefighter does. Responding to a crisis – all sirens blazing and trucks racing to a fire – constitutes approximately 10% of the workload. There is necessarily a significant amount of human contact

either side of the fire-fighting. It is useful to have both male and female perspectives and approaches in performing this sort of work.

25 In short, an organisation like MFB carrying the level of community support that it does, and being heavily involved in the community both as an organisation and through individual employees, I see gender diversity and inclusiveness as very important.

26 The work I do in this area has two aspects:

26.1 looking at the organisation and what do we do within the organisation to make it more inclusive and diverse; and

26.2 sending out a picture to the community of the MFB as modelling the kind of inclusiveness we want the broader community to have.

Steps to achieve diversity and inclusion

27 There is some work being done at MFB to achieve the kind of diversity and inclusiveness (in respect of both gender and other issues) that I discuss above. The leaders of the MFB – the executive leadership team and the board – see diversity and inclusion as imperative to best practice operation of the organisation.

28 The work on gender equity started in 2004 when a Gender Equity Research program was commissioned. This included consultations, workshops and interviews with internal staff between 2004 and 2006.

29 In 2007, a Diversity in Emergency Services Conference, jointly organised by the MFB and the United Firefighters' Union was held, out of which a Diversity Development Framework was developed and subsequently endorsed by the MFB Board. The Diversity Development Framework consists of four action plans covering disability, Aboriginal, multicultural and gender issues.

30 In March 2010, the MFB launched the Gender Inclusion Action Plan 2010-2013 (**Gender Inclusion Action Plan**), which included 45 actions falling under seven broad strategic areas: recruitment, retention and training, public image, internal communication, external communication, physical environment and community engagement and services.

31 The Gender Inclusion Action Plan aims to reduce barriers to gender inclusion and acknowledges the importance of not only increasing the diversity of the workforce but also putting in place policies and programs that nurture, protect, and harness the diversity within.

32 As is set out in the Gender Inclusion Action Plan, I believe increased representation of women amongst firefighters will benefit both the MFB's

responsiveness and relevance to the community it serves. Gender diversity will lead to broader access to different perspectives, more creative solutions and innovative ideas. Adopting best practices for gender inclusion will improve employment outcomes and increase the diversity profile of the MFB, thus enabling the MFB to better serve the interests of the Victorian community. Further, modelling this kind of best practice may influence the wider community and ultimately contribute to broader societal change.

- 33 Attached to this statement and marked **SO-1** is a copy of the Gender Inclusion Action Plan.

White Ribbon involvement

- 34 I became an ambassador of White Ribbon in 2008. From there, I involved my workplace. I often spoke about White Ribbon at work; I used International Women's Day and White Ribbon Day to be able to broach the subject of gender and family violence in particular. I also presented at knowledge networks and held various lunches. Initially there was a quite a bit of interest in White Ribbon and its work, and 15 or 20 other men signed up as ambassadors as well.

- 35 There is some reticence to discuss family violence at work and I believe that is because there is a thought that if we start talking about these issues we might find we have perpetrators within the organisation. This is both because the organisation is fairly large and because it is predominantly made up of male employees. This is almost certainly the case, as it is the case that there would be victims of family violence in our workplace.

- 36 In 2015 I was accepted as the Victorian member of the National White Ribbon Indigenous and Torres Strait Islander Family Violence reference group and have offered to inform their Cultural and Linguistically Diverse family violence reference group also.

Learnings about the role of gender in disasters

- 37 Over the past five years, research conducted by Women's Health Goulburn North East and Women's Health in the North in Victoria with women – and then with men – has started the conversation on catastrophic disaster and gender in Australia. Two research projects, 'The Way He Tells It: Relationships after Black Saturday' and 'Men on Black Saturday: Risks and Opportunities for Change' were followed by conferences, 'Identifying the Hidden Disaster' in 2012 and 'Just Ask' in 2013, which galvanised support for attention to gender in emergency management.

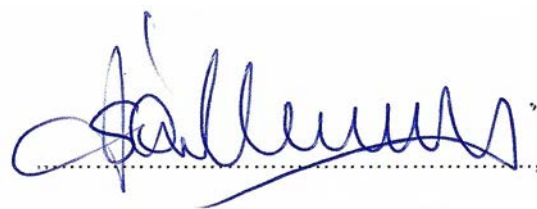
- 38 From there, Emergency Management Victoria - Gender & Disaster Taskforce (**GAD**) was established to provide state-wide strategic direction and leadership to reduce the compounding effects of gender on disaster impacts. The GAD aims to bring a gender-focus to disaster policy, planning, training and practice, in order to improve the support that men and women receive before and after disaster, mitigate risks to men and women's health and wellbeing post-disaster, and build awareness of the critical need for attention to gender in disaster planning and community recovery. I am a member of the GAD Taskforce and the GAD Men's Advisory Group.
- 39 As gender inequality and societal complicity contribute to the prevalence of men's violence against women, changing the culture of emergency management to include equal contribution by women at all levels was also identified as an important strategy.
- 40 One example of the sorts of issues that the GAD considers can be seen in the way in which the old bushfires 'Stay or Go' policy used to operate. Under this policy, men would often place an expectation on themselves to stay to defend the family home from the bushfire. They take on a hyper-masculine approach and tell their families, 'You go, I'll stay and defend the home'. This puts men in danger. However, it also puts women and children in danger too. They delay leaving because they don't want to leave the man behind, and they are concerned about his safety. The community rewards that kind of behaviour and even glorifies it. In short, the gender stereotypes that exist that make the man feel like a coward if he leaves the home endanger not only the man but his family as well.
- 41 The GAD Taskforce sets out to achieve the following seven objectives.
- 41.1 To transform the work environments and practices of emergency service organisations so that women find working in them to be welcoming and inclusive.
 - 41.2 To transform the work environments and practices of emergency service organisations so that men feel encouraged to work against harmful, destructive, conscious and unconscious masculine behaviours to self and others, and feel less pressure to engage in them.
 - 41.3 To improve the gender-specific support that men and women in ESOs and other emergency management organisations receive after disasters.
 - 41.4 To achieve Objectives 1-3 in ways that improve respect for the needs of diverse groups, for example culture, sexuality, and age, in relation to how it intersects with the issue of gender.

- 41.5 To improve the gender-specific support that men and women, along with boys and girls, throughout the community receive after disasters.
- 41.6 To embed a gender lens across culture and systems relating to disasters to improve community outcomes following future disasters.
- 41.7 To ensure efficient and responsive taskforce planning, reflective of gender equity and representative of the principles of the foundational document.

Family violence and the role of MFB in a multi-disciplinary response

- 42 In August 2014 I applied to the MFB and was granted a Chief Officer's scholarship to look at how fire services can identify and refer incidents that may involve family violence, and to look at multidisciplinary models where information across different agencies, including emergency services, is shared between those organisations with the ultimate aim of prevention.
- 43 I am intending to visit various organisations in the United Kingdom to look at the multidisciplinary models that exist, including the Multi-Agency-Risk-Assessment-Conference (**MARAC**). My ultimate goal is to establish whether Australian fire services can contribute to the Risk Assessment Management Panels (**RAMPs**), soon to be rolled-out in Victoria and to establish 'risk identification training' as part of fire-fighter professional development and training.
- 44 The main aim of the MARAC is to reduce the risk of serious harm or homicide for a family violence victim and to increase the safety, health and wellbeing of other victims, both adults and children. At a MARAC, local agencies will meet to discuss the highest risk victims of family violence in their area. Information about the risks faced by those victims, the actions needed to ensure safety, and the resources available locally are shared and used to create a risk management plan involving all relevant agencies.
- 45 The agencies include organisations like the police, health care practitioners, child protection, women's health, drug and alcohol and housing practitioners. It is starting to become more accepted, and I am of the view that emergency services, such as firefighters, can play a role in this kind of forum and would benefit from a greater awareness of issues like family violence. We often see families at particularly vulnerable moments in which emotions and tensions are high. Our firefighters may observe a pattern of incidents emerging at a particular address which could be attributed to family violence, there might be signs that the type of incident is a result of malice from a partner, or the victim may disclose that they are suffering family violence.

- 46 Accordingly, the participation of MFB in a multi-disciplinary model in which vulnerable or high risk individuals or families are identified, and actions determined as to how best to support that family or individual, could be highly beneficial.
- 47 A comparable example is that of our approach to hoarding. Individuals who are hoarders create very dangerous situations, in respect of the likelihood and consequences of a fire, both for themselves and for the firefighters who ultimately may have to attend an incident at that property. Through partnerships with mental health professionals, local government and Home and Community Care, we are able to identify certain individuals who may have an unsafe property. We can attend that property and make the house safer. We don't understand mental health, we don't attempt to psychoanalyse the individual or provide a response to the behaviour itself. But we can make the house safer, both for ourselves and the resident. The better we can identify risk and mitigate the circumstances, the better the outcome. Taking an active approach with victims of family violence will similarly lead to better outcomes.
- 48 Operationally the majority of our workforce has a particular, quite narrow focus on what it believes constitutes our "core business". In many ways this is very reactive. Given MFB's vision for 'safer and more resilient communities', I think there is capacity for MFB to broaden its traditional core business and play an active role in dealing with issues such as the prevention of family violence. The door is generally opened a little wider when a firefighter knocks. And if paramedics, vets, dentists, GPs and Council Local Laws officers are doing this kind of work – why aren't we?



Stephen Patrick O'Malley

Dated: 7 August 2015