



Level 23, 121 Exhibition St
Melbourne Vic 3000
GPO Box 4356
Melbourne Vic 3001

T +613 8685 1355
F +613 8684 1399
E admin@emv.vic.gov.au
DX 210077

www.emv.vic.gov.au

3 August 2015

Our ref: CD/15/339799

Ms Sophie Dunstone
Committee Secretary
Legal and Constitutional References Committee
The Senate

[sent via email: LegCon.Sen@aph.gov.au]

Dear Ms Dunstone

INQUIRY INTO THE USE OF SMOKE ALARMS TO PREVENT SMOKE AND FIRE RELATED DEATHS

Thank you for the invitation to provide material in relation to the above matter.

EMV supports a sector-wide approach to achieve joined up outcomes that are community focussed. With this in mind, the issue of residential smoke alarms is clearly one that touches directly on the lives of all Victorians. It is a matter of record that in 1997, Victoria became the first Australian jurisdiction to mandate the installation of smoke alarms in domestic dwellings.

I am aware that the two Victorian fire agencies with responsibility for structural firefighting will be supplying information to the Inquiry. The Metropolitan Fire and Emergency Services Board (MFB) is responding to a request from the Committee and intends to provide a submission containing evidence in relation to each of the terms of reference.

I am advised that the Country Fire Authority (CFA), which serves much of the greater Melbourne metropolitan area in addition to provincial and rural Victoria did not receive a specific invitation to provide material to the Inquiry. However, CFA has prepared material addressing the terms of reference that will be submitted as part of a comprehensive submission being prepared by the Australasian Fire and Emergency Services Council (AFAC), the industry body representing fire and emergency services across Australia.

It is beyond the expertise of this office to offer technical advice on the recommendations, this being properly the remit of the fire services and industry. For example, the relative merits of ionisation smoke alarms versus photo-electric units are discussed in some detail in evidence provided by the Victorian fire services. Drafts of the material to be presented by the two services have been reviewed by senior EMV officers and will provide the inquiry with some valuable insights in relation to such technical matters, along with the history and impact of smoke alarm use in Victoria.

It is appropriate, however, for EMV to offer the following observations that touch more generally on policy in this area.

- There is ample evidence to suggest that properly fitted and working smoke alarms save lives in residential fire events. EMV strongly endorses Victoria's provisions that require every domestic dwelling to have a smoke alarm.



Inquiry into the Use of Smoke Alarms to Prevent Smoke and Fire Related Deaths

- The installation of smoke alarms makes a significant contribution to community resilience in a common domestic emergency, which claims more lives annually than bushfire. In its broadest sense, albeit at a micro level, this is clearly in accord with some of the high-level principles (e.g. shared responsibility) enshrined in the National Disaster Resilience Strategy.
- Evidence presented by the fire services suggests there is a preference for the installation of hard-wired units with long-life battery backup. A practical barrier in this regard, with public policy implications, is the relative expense of these units compared to other battery-based technologies.
- A fundamental issue, particularly in the context of demographic changes and specific vulnerabilities within the Victorian community, is the need to consider smoke alarms in the context of other fire safety measures. Those most at risk in domestic fires are those already vulnerable by reason of factors such as age, mobility or mental capacity. For an increasing number within the community, the presence (or not) of a smoke alarm alone will not be a sufficient intervention to promote, let alone guarantee, a successful fire safety outcome.
- Evidence presented by the Victorian fire services points to the need to explore measures such as the mandatory installation of domestic sprinklers in all new homes. While EMV has no specific policy position on residential sprinklers, it does support the suggestion that national consultation should occur on the merits of introducing residential sprinklers as a further measure to reduce smoke and fire related deaths

EMV would be pleased to present any further material to the Inquiry that may be required. Please do not hesitate to contact me if EMV can be of further assistance.

Yours sincerely

Craig Lapsley PSM
Emergency Management Commissioner

cc. Mr Michael Wootten, CEO CFA
Mr Jim Higgins, CEO MFB
Mr Stuart Ellis, CEO AFAC