



MEDIA RELEASE

Media Statement 20 July 2023

STATEMENT ON RESIGNATION OF ACT EMERGENCY SERVICES AGENCY COMMISSIONER

On behalf of all ACT Fire and Rescue Firefighters, the United Firefighters Union – ACT Branch extends its thanks and best wishes to ACT Emergency Services Commissioner Georgeina Whelan.

As talented as we think she is, the Commissioner always had her work cut out for her in trying to make the current structure of the ACT Emergency Services Agency (ESA) work.

The United Firefighters Union has been on the record for some time on the broader structural issues and the lack of accountability when things go wrong with the ESA.

Professional firefighters have encountered significant passive and active resistance to the implementation of reforms that were agreed to as part of their enterprise bargaining agreement, and there seems to be no consequence attached to this other than the community and firefighters missing out.

Despite being agreed to by the ACT Government in 2020, many of these reforms have not even commenced.

Most notably, we are still to see additional fire trucks crewed, and construction of new stations is well behind schedule. Firefighters still don't have a medical screening program aimed at early detection of illnesses such as cancer. Firefighting is recognised by the World Health Organisation as a cancer-causing profession, and right now, the union is pursuing several claims for occupational cancer.

Last month, we received news that a serving ACT firefighter, just 36 years old, was diagnosed with aggressive cancer. Had a medical screening program been in place, this firefighter's life might well be quite different.

The ACT Government must now take the opportunity to recommit to implementing what was agreed with us and to address structural issues within and surrounding the ESA that have been problems since at least 2004. No matter who comes into the role, if the structural issues within the ESA are not addressed, the new organisation will replicate the same problems.

There is no doubt that Commissioner Whelan has exerted a great degree of effort and urgency in the pursuit of the ACT Government's preferred arrangements, and for that, she deserves respect.

While we wish her well, we must acknowledge that the ACT Government's preferred arrangements for the ESA have not worked and require revisiting.

The immediate priority now is establishing stability, providing certainty to the community, and instilling confidence among firefighters, other emergency services personnel, and ESA staff.

We offer to work cooperatively with the ACT Government in doing just that.

ACT UFU Secretary Greg McConville is available for interview and comment on 0488 000 465.

Media Contact: Darren Rodrigo 0414 783 405