

Colorado SAR 1940's - 2019

In Colorado search and rescue ("SAR") is performed entirely by volunteers. The roughly 2600 volunteer professional SAR responders serve on 54 nonprofit SAR teams. In 2019 they gave approximately 415,000 hours for SAR incident response, training, and administrative time. They gave 475,000 hours of "on-call time." The current SAR system functions safely and efficiently, and the dedicated rescuers have always been ready to respond anywhere in Colorado.

SAR has been primarily a local issue; each sheriff has an unfunded statutory mandate to coordinate SAR within their county. SAR teams, sheriff's offices, and counties typically have great relationships as they do an incredible amount to support each other. Almost all mountain counties have at least one nonprofit SAR team to call on 24/7. However, as Colorado's outdoor recreation industry grows to over \$60 billion annually and the population continues to grow, a great deal more reliance and pressure has been placed on these SAR professionals. In some very important ways, SAR is a safety net upon which a portion of the Colorado economy relies. Most SAR teams depend on grants and donations to operate and are often under-equipped and under-staffed. These SAR teams are all there is to rescue those lost or injured in the backcountry. The only backup for a SAR team is their fellow SAR teams and a few specialized partners. These community-minded women and men cover their own costs, often more than \$6,000 annually (over \$10M combined), so that a team is always available to respond when a hiker, skier, child, hunter, angler, mountain biker, snowmobiler, rafter, climber, kayaker, paraglider, or suicidal party needs help. This help is freely given and no Colorado SAR team charges for its services. The Colorado SAR Fund does assist counties with some funding, but this support is trivial when compared to the actual costs.

In 1947, the first organized SAR team in Colorado was formed, Rocky Mountain Rescue Group ("RMRG"), in Boulder. This team is now the busiest non-paid professional SAR team in the nation with 235 calls in 2018, up over 20% from its previous busiest year (2016). That's 235 times that RMRG's 75 members were asked to leave their families and jobs to help a stranger. Vail Mountain Rescue has seen its calls increase from 67 to 147 in five years. SAR teams are more frequently called across the state to assist each other as the number of incidents climb. These calls are being shouldered by an aging SAR membership. Younger folks aren't joining, aren't staying for the long term, or can't afford to live in our mountain communities. Carrying broken people off of 14ers, accessing and searching avalanche debris, evacuating someone off a cliff face, or rescue diving in a high altitude lake requires very specialized skills that must be performed in dangerous environments, under very physically and mentally challenging conditions; pair that with the mental and emotional stress injuries endured by these rescuers when recovering those who do not survive, and you can understand some of the challenges.

SAR is a vital part of the emergency services community working very closely with law enforcement, fire, the EMS system, USFS, CO State Parks and Wildlife, ski patrols, land managers, and the Colorado National Guard. SAR also supports sustainable recreation and is a keystone part of the outdoor recreation community, not only providing rescue services but also outdoor safety education to adults and children to proactively protect our citizens and visitors. SAR is a part of Colorado and one of the reasons we have our unique Colorado way of life.