

Colorado SAR - 2019 and Beyond

The excerpt below is from early 2019. Since then, Covid-19 has changed the world and is challenging search and rescue (SAR) worldwide. The Colorado Search and Rescue Association (CSAR) and its member teams are being pushed to the breaking point and many predict it will worsen this winter. The volunteer SAR teams face a perfect storm of unprecedented factors with potentially dire consequences. Proactively designing a sustainable SAR system in Colorado is now urgent and, as the experts, CSAR and its member teams must lead this process.

From May 2019:

Colorado must proactively prepare and reconfigure our SAR system. As we look forward we might want to take a tip from the past. The Colorado Disaster Emergency Act of 1973 charged the newly created Division of Disaster Emergency Services with the development of a “viable State Search, Rescue and Recovery System integrating the available resources of governmental and private agencies/organizations.” This system was never fully created and the wording has since changed. Maybe our predecessors were before their time. Maybe now is the time to re-evaluate their ideas?

While CSAR remains open to ideas, collaboratively combining state government, local government, and nonprofit organizations into an entity or a system that has the appropriate funding and staff to support both local and statewide SAR efforts is likely the path forward. The county-by-county model of SAR must adapt as we become a more technologically-connected society and develop unique, but expensive, statewide resources. However, local control by the sheriffs is vital to provide rapid response and local knowledge of terrain along with the necessary collaboration with the rest of the emergency services system.

As we design the future of SAR in Colorado, we can pull many ideas and advancements from other states and countries. One area that needs immediate attention is the emotional health of the SAR volunteers. Emergency incidents (SAR, fire, LE, EMS) can take an incredible toll on the mental and emotional health of the responders. Caring for the severely injured for extended periods of time and recovering the deceased are commonplace activities in SAR. Stress trauma can stay with rescuers for the rest of their lives. We must come up with ways to assist rescuers who have given so much for Colorado. There have been some major advances in this field and Colorado is home to a host of experts willing to help.

CSAR believes we need:

- 1) better coordination amongst the counties
- 2) better funding available for statewide and local resources
 - more funding but less time spent fundraising
- 3) better support of the volunteers
 - a system of reimbursing out-of-pocket costs and funding a retirement system
 - an effective mental health support system
 - death benefits and other benefits to support the families of these volunteers
- 4) better support of the nonprofit SAR teams
 - better tools with which to attract, develop, and retain volunteers who have the appropriate experience and dedication
 - a statutory system that better protects the teams and SAR volunteers from civil liability and provides statewide workers' compensation
- 5) more resources available to the sheriffs
 - an expanded SAR system that is always ready to support any county
 - access to statewide SAR resources that are always available
 - better integration of SAR into the statutory scheme of emergency and disaster response.
- 6) statewide preventative outdoor safety education programs to protect our citizens and visitors

Beginning in May, 2019, CSAR worked with stakeholders across Colorado to introduce a bill to the Colorado legislature (SB20-130) to start the process of engineering a sustainable backcountry SAR system. The bill received wide bipartisan support and had strong backing from the Governor and many state departments, along with the counties and sheriffs. Unfortunately, it fell victim to the budget impacts of COVID-19 and won't be revisited until 2021 or '22.

This defeat in the legislature occurred at the same time as a dramatic increase in the number of users on our public lands. Recreationists from Colorado and many other states flocked to Colorado's mountains, canyons, and campgrounds seeking solace from COVID-19. CSAR and many of its member teams have seen an unprecedented rise in the number of calls received and hours donated. Lake County reported that during June, July, and August, call volume was up 300% over the same months in 2019. There will be over 300 SAR calls by the end of 2020 in Boulder County. Conejos County had 12 calls over a two-day period, when they typically get about 20 calls per year.

CSAR operations were heavily impacted as well. When a sheriff's office needs SAR resources to augment their local team(s), they use CSAR's state SAR coordinators to facilitate those resources. The sheriffs have requested assistance from CSAR twice as many times in 2020 as they did in 2018. During one two-week period CSAR had calls running for a total of 170 hours. If these calls were placed back-to-back, the two on-call state SAR coordinators would have handled calls for 12 hours a day continuously for two weeks -- as volunteers. Luckily, some of these calls occurred concurrently.

Oddly, some SAR teams are having somewhat normal or even quieter years in terms of responding to emergencies. Covid-19's effect on travel patterns and a record-setting wildfire season may be factors. SAR data is only collected once a year in the spring.

Not only have SAR teams been hit with an increased need for SAR services, but for roughly three months they ceased training and only responded to emergencies. Most were forced to cancel new member recruitment and fundraising events. When the pandemic started and PPE was in short supply, SAR teams struggled to protect their responders. Fortunately, CSAR managed to procure much needed PPE for SAR teams and supported them in developing special operations plans to protect responders. Some in the outdoor industry have generously provided donations to combat the impacts of COVID-19. CSAR has hosted meetings and training events to assist SAR responders with the mental and emotional stress they continue to face. As of December, we are fortunate to be able to say there is no record of a SAR responder contracting COVID-19 during a SAR incident.

Preparations have begun for the winter of '20/21 to the degree possible. As ski areas are restricting in-area access, the need for backcountry SAR is predicted to be at an all-time high. Backcountry ski and snowboard gear, snowmobiles, and avalanche safety equipment is reportedly in short supply. If spring of '20 was any indication, experienced and inexperienced Coloradans and visitors will be swarming across the Colorado backcountry this winter. A large number of these recreationists are likely to have little or no experience with Colorado's historically deadly snowpack. Usage patterns may also be changing; people are working from home and may follow the storm cycle rather than recreating on weekends. This has the potential to increase pressure on SAR responders with weekday jobs.

The Colorado Office of Outdoor Recreation Industry, Office of Tourism, and Parks and Wildlife, in collaboration with CSAR and a host of other stakeholders, developed a winter outdoor safety awareness and education campaign in an attempt to guide public expectations, save lives, and lessen the need for SAR. Even if this program is wildly successful, CSAR is expecting the uptick in SAR calls to continue. SAR teams are working to increase their capacity to provide emergency response, but these efforts are challenging as it takes many winters to develop the experience necessary to respond to avalanche accidents or to rescue those lost and injured in our rugged mountains. SAR teams need strong, experienced outdoors men and women who relish working in extreme environments, have strong constitutions, and are willing to give substantial time and work as a team. They must also be able to either self-fund these SAR activities, or at least not get fired from their day jobs for supporting their communities. Some of the questions we have posed to our SAR teams and sheriffs for consideration include:

- Will there be an increase in concurrent incidents?
- Will the incidents be more complex, i.e. mass casualty avalanches?
- Will access be more difficult with overflowing parking lots?
- Will experienced backcountry recreationists push further into the backcountry to escape the crowds, thus laying tracks others will follow?
- What will we do if a significant number of SAR responders on a team are quarantined?
- Can SAR handle in-area calls if ski areas suddenly close?
- If SAR calls come in concurrently, what are the triage plans?

2020 is taking a toll on dedicated SAR responders. Some rescuers have been risking their lives and giving hundreds of hours each year for over 40 years. Some have had to take a step back to care for sick family members, are unable to support SAR because of a job loss, are concerned about the risks associated with responding during COVID-19, or have simply burned out. SAR teams have fewer new members, are losing seasoned members, and are having more difficulty raising funds.

Since 2018, CSAR's volunteer leadership team has been working to engineer a new and sustainable SAR system. Some have been volunteering 30 to 60+ hours per week. When COVID-19 hit and the 2020 SAR bill failed in the legislature, these leaders pivoted to put in even more time and energy to adapt the current SAR system to maintain continuity of services to our communities and protect volunteer SAR professionals across Colorado. Some of these people have foregone a salary for years to ensure SAR teams are prepared and able to save thousands of lives each year. This is just another unsustainable facet of the current situation.

SAR responders will continue to lace up their boots and shoulder their backpacks as they volunteer to support Colorado communities as best they can. That's just who we are.