

Colorado Search and Rescue Primer

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Definition of a Search and Rescue (SAR) Incident: The search for; possible medical care of; and evacuation of lost, injured, deceased, or stuck person(s) located in a place that is not commonly accessible by highway vehicles or more standard emergency medical services. (Please note SAR in this context does not include “urban SAR” or collapsed structures.)

History: Organized SAR in Colorado started in the mid 1940's with the foundation of the RMRG in Boulder and the creation of the Colorado Wing of the Civil Air Patrol. For the next 10 years RMRG covered the entire state. Arapahoe Rescue Patrol (Douglas and Arapahoe Counties) formed in 1957, Alpine Rescue Team (Clear Creek County) in 1959, and Mountain Rescue Aspen in 1965. Now there are teams in every mountain county. To coordinate the SAR teams' responses across jurisdictions, the Colorado Rescue Association was formed in 1963. This has evolved into the CSAR which has continued to coordinate and educate the SAR teams, sheriffs, and other agencies.

To preserve the amazing 70+ year history and the largely unknown, brave, and honorable acts of the SAR teams, the Colorado Mountain Rescue History Center is currently under construction.

Sheriff Authority: The State of Colorado has placed the duty to coordinate search and rescue on the sheriff of each county. C.R.S. § 24-33.5-707(10). This is a long-standing unfunded mandate. Each sheriff coordinates SAR in their own unique way. Most counties have a single team, some have multiple teams. Some delegate almost all of this duty to the non-paid professionals; some have paid sheriff positions overseeing SAR; others combine fire, EMS, and SAR to do the best they can as they are the only ones willing.

Collaboration With Other Entities: SAR teams work for sheriffs and with fire districts, ambulance services, and other emergency responders. If a SAR incident(s) exceeds the capacity of a county, CSAR is often called to secure SAR resources from across the state to respond in a mutual aid capacity. If an incident becomes a state-declared disaster, the CSAR works closely with the Colorado Division of Homeland Security and Emergency Management to ensure the proper SAR resources are available. CSAR and the SAR teams work closely with a host of State of Colorado departments, the Colorado National Guard, the Civil Air Patrol, the USFS, and a great number of other for-profit and nonprofit entities, and local agencies, not to mention other first responders and the health care systems.

Non-Paid Professionals: The vast majority of SAR in the United States is performed by non-paid professionals. In Colorado SAR members are always on call and must be experienced mountaineers, rock climbers, kayakers, skiers, etc. These recreationalists are stewards of both our environment as well as the people who enjoy these wild places. SAR members each end up spending thousands of dollars out of pocket each year for personal equipment, for gas, and even in lost wages when responding to SAR incidents and trainings. It

is estimated that there are more than 2800 SAR members in Colorado that give over 500,000 person hours per year in training and responding to more than 3300 SAR incidents per year.

No Charge For Rescue: There is a strong history and ethic in SAR to provide services free of charge. The 2018 United State SAR Supplement to the International SAR manual strongly discourages charging for SAR. There are many instances of individuals fearing a bill and attempting to self-rescue. This often causes more harm to themselves or others trying to help. There are numerous examples of people delaying a call for help because they fear a bill. This delay often creates more dangerous conditions for the SAR teams. Charging for SAR in Europe has been shown to increase the number of calls and may create a “duty to rescue”; thus stressing the SAR system further and increasing the risk to those involved.

The Colorado Search and Rescue Fund (C.R.S. § 33-1-112.5) (SAR Fund): Colorado formed the first statewide SAR Fund to help offset costs incurred by sheriffs for search and rescue. The SAR Fund is funded by mandatory fees on certain sportsmen’s licenses and the voluntary Colorado Outdoor Recreation Search and Rescue Card. The fees were statutorily set at 25¢ per license in the 1980s and have not changed. This fund is not insurance to individuals but a fund to be used by sheriffs to reimburse costs associated with SAR or for funds for SAR training or SAR equipment. The SAR Fund hovers around \$400,000 annually. Some of the funds go to reimbursement for direct costs but the large majority goes for equipment and training for future SAR incidents. Every year the requests far exceed the funds available.

Funding and Governance: SAR teams across Colorado are mostly self-governed 501(c)3 organizations, often with an internal board of directors. The very busy larger teams have annual budgets over \$100,000, a fleet of trucks, snowmobiles, ATVs, boats, large caches of gear, upwards of 75 members, and respond to roughly 200 incidents per year. The smallest teams have annual budgets of under \$10,000, few resources, maybe 10 members, and respond to a handful of incidents per year. Most teams are self-funded through direct fundraising, grants and donations. A few SAR teams receive funds from their county, others are forced to ask their members to pay membership fees or participate in various bake-sale-type events to keep their teams operating. The collective operating expenses of these non-profit teams exceed \$3,000,000 annually, with \$0 going to salaries. Estimated salary cost to perform SAR services across Colorado would be well in excess of \$40,000,000 per year.

Some fire departments have ventured into SAR but many have realized that their taxpayers expect fire resources to be available for traditional fire services. These fire departments have learned that they can’t afford the large number of people, equipment, and training necessary to execute successful SAR incidents while maintaining adequate “in town” staffing.

Advances in SAR: SAR teams are doing their best to exploit new technologies and Colorado is fortunate to have some extremely dedicated non-paid professional SAR members who ensure that Colorado stays at the forefront of SAR techniques. A majority of the United States delegates to the International Commission for Alpine Rescue come from Colorado. The Colorado Army National Guard, CSAR, and 4 Colorado SAR teams are pioneering a first-in-the-nation collaborative program to provide helicopter hoist rescue services across

Colorado and capable at Colorado's highest elevations. Colorado teams are working with the the United States Air Force to provide better techniques to search for cell phones that are outside of coverage areas, airborne UAVs and submarine ROVs (drones) are commonly being utilized by Colorado SAR teams, and even NASA has turned to Colorado SAR to help develop rescue techniques that one day may be used on Mars.

Challenges to SAR in Colorado: As the number of SAR incidents increases, SAR teams across the state are reporting an aging of their membership with fewer younger people applying or staying for long terms. Retention of members is becoming concerning. Attracting new dedicated members seems to be growing more difficult. It is becoming more challenging for the large busy teams to travel across the state to support the smaller remote teams.

SAR is a team endeavor. There are no individual heroes, very little fame, no fortune in SAR, and a very lengthy initial training period. It is a full time effort to find dedicated community-minded responders, with a great deal of free time, who have the ability to deal with the psychological challenges (stress injuries), and the physically hard and dangerous work. These non-paid professionals must have the skills and experience necessary to be safe in the Colorado mountains while at the same time are humble enough to put his or her team first.

With the increase in cell phone coverage and satellite communication devices, recreationalists are calling for help sooner and expecting rapid service. Many of these calls are appropriate, some are simply a strain on the system. Helicopter use is becoming more common in SAR in Colorado but helicopters aren't always available and can be quite dangerous and expensive.

Document Purpose: Now, with some understanding of SAR in Colorado and with the recognition that Colorado's growing population is putting intense pressure on public lands you can understand that SAR is under similar pressure. We support sustainable outdoor recreation, a healthy environment, and believe we are a stakeholder in the Colorado outdoor recreation economy. SAR, in some sense, is the insurance policy or safety net upon which many outdoor industries and communities rely. SAR serves the residents; the communities; the outdoor industries; the tourists; and, in a very important way, preserves the unique Colorado way of life.

Our goal is to collaboratively engineer a better and more sustainable future for SAR in Colorado. As the current leaders of SAR statewide, we see what is occurring across the state and are concerned about the long term sustainability of the current SAR model. CSAR is seeking help to develop a new and possibly innovative SAR model. Our members have ideas but SAR cannot do this alone. Like much of the outdoor recreation industry, SAR is interwoven with many different facets of Colorado. In order to effectively evolve, SAR via CSAR needs to be involved in the appropriate conversations and at the table with various industries, non-profits, and many levels of government. CSAR believes that it is in Colorado's best interest to have strong and stable SAR teams ready and able to respond for the current and future generations.