

Dietrich, Rodney

From: Monica Ahlstrom [mavada@cruzinternet.com]
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To: Monica Ahlstrom
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To the membership of search and rescue in Alberta
 From Monica Ahlstrom

I am writing this letter because a situation with SAR Alberta and the lead ministry has reached a point at which I feel compelled to speak out. EMA has now declared that search and rescue should come under them and that Municipal Affairs and Housing should be the lead ministry. I do not believe that having SAR under the EMA is in the best interest of search and rescue.

For those of you who may not know who I am:

I started with search and rescue in Rocky Mountain House in 1991.

I was the first president of SAR Alberta and sat through all the meetings in creation of the organization. I was the president for three years.

I was Alberta's representative in the creation of the Search and Rescue Volunteer Association of Canada, sat at the Alberta representative for two years and then as President for six years. I currently sit as the Past-President for SARVAC.

I sat last year as the Past-President of SAR Alberta at the President's invitation.

I am about to give you a lot of information that will require some reading and thought on your part. I hope you take the time to read it and pass it on to other members in SAR Alberta.

Thank you in advance for your time.

Background

A year ago I was approached by the President of SAR Alberta, Reese Woolsey, to attend a meeting with himself, the Solicitor General Harvey Cenaiko, the minister's staff and former SAR Alberta president Paul Olmstead. At that time I had already agreed to an invitation to come back to SAR Alberta as the Past-President, so I attended the meeting in that capacity. Vice President Rodney Dietrich had also be invited to the meeting but was unable to make it due to work commitments. The meeting was called very quickly by the Solicitor General himself.

At the meeting the Solicitor General brought out a number of letters SAR Alberta had sent the ministry over the years asking the Sol. Gen. to take on the role of lead ministry. The Solicitor General opened the meeting by asking if search and rescue would be willing train the Sheriff's department in basic SAR and possibly incident command. It was noted by Paul Olmstead that SAR Alberta was not necessarily a training organization but that SAR Alberta was certainly willing to help facilitate something that would work for the Sheriff's. However, after more discussion it became clear that what the Solicitor General was really getting at was that he wanted to bring search and rescue under his ministry and he felt that the newly created Sheriff's department would have the resources, time and most importantly budget to support search and rescue. At that point he asked us what search and rescue wanted from him, that he was willing to see that we got what we needed. Unfortunately we did not have a very good answer for him. It was, to say the least, a bit disconcerting although SAR Alberta had been asking the Sol Gen in writing to be its lead ministry for years, and sometimes very forcefully – SAR Alberta had nothing in writing, no mandate for the board, no policy, no plan – not a thing - to suggest how that should look.

After the Minister asked a third time what SAR wanted I suggested we needed four things – to be under a ministry that had the ability to deal with law enforcement, administrative support for search and rescue, standardized training and an individual who could work directly with and for search and rescue. Once we indicated that yes, we would work with his ministry the Minister turned to his staff and said lets make this happen. At that point we were

asked for any information we could provide the Solicitor General to help them set things up – we were asked for our business plan. Unfortunately at that time, SAR Alberta did not have one.

As we were leaving the meeting the Minister asked when he could send out the press release announcing the Sol Gen as the lead ministry for SAR. We asked him to wait until we had discussed the issue with the rest of SAR Alberta. Paul, Reece and I all submitted written reports, and in the case of Reese and I, verbal reports to the SAR Alberta board about this meeting.

The person looking after the project from the Solicitor General's office was Vince Caleffi, with the Sheriffs. Before Vince could precede SAR Alberta needed to send him a business plan so I agreed to write a the plan defining SAR Alberta's needs and showing how we could work with and through the Sheriff's department. The SAR Alberta board reviewed and adopted a draft of this plan but it was never disseminated to the teams or general membership

Once the plan was adopted by the SAR Alberta board it went forward to the Sol Gen's office and was reviewed and a few suggestions made by and Assistant Deputy Minister. Mr. Caleffi, met again with Paul and Reese and I, I also spoke to him separately on occasions as I worked on the business plan. He also talked to others in search and rescue in the province, both professionals and volunteers as he worked on this project. He also attended the General Meeting of SAR Alberta in the fall. As with any department the hold up was in sorting out the funding that would be available. In the initial meeting with the Minister he stated he believed the \$150,000 training grant from EMA should stay in place, noting EMA still had an important role in search and rescue. With the grant still in place it would allow his Ministry to put money directly toward the other needs of search and rescue. And indeed that is what would have happened.

Had Harvey Cenaiko remained Solicitor General things probably would have continued fairly smoothly, as it was his directive that was driving this process. However as you know there was leadership change and with it a change in Minister. Paul, Reese and I again met with the new Minister Fred Lindsay. Minister Lindsay was not fully aware of the initiative but promised to follow up on it, which indeed he did. Though supportive he did not have the background, or information that Mr. Cenaiko did and was relying on his staff for input. However, the process was still continuing forward under Mr. Lindsay and it was expected that all the information needed would be presented to the SAR Alberta board and the membership by the AGM.

Another problem also arose – at a board meeting in the fall it was brought up, that SAR Alberta may not want to support the Solicitor General's proposal and that not enough information was available to make this decision because the Solicitor General hadn't come forward with what they were prepared to do. I noted it was a little late now to be deciding whether or not to work with the Solicitor General, after years of SAR Alberta asking them to be our ministry, and explained the Sol Gen was basically offering us what we asked for. SAR Alberta had the opportunity to have a huge influence over what was happening and to set the agenda. I noted I would take whatever SAR Alberta wanted to the Solicitor General but first someone needed to let me know what that was. The come back was always "but what are they offering us? It became a chicken and egg argument that no one seemed to get. But what did become clear was that SAR Alberta once again had no mandate, and that the level of trust on the SAR Alberta board was virtually non-existent. At this point it became very difficult for me, or anyone else for that matter to negotiate on behalf of SAR Alberta.

The lack of the boards understanding of the issues truly at heart came clear at the AGM when the President of SAR Alberta stood up and said the only major thing the board had worked on all year was the lead ministry, he didn't know were it was at and maybe we didn't need a ministry anyway. I did take issue with this, as he was involved in all the meetings and in fact was the head of the lead ministry committee. The position of "maybe we don't need a ministry" was re-iterated by the newly elected Vice-President.

In the meantime, EMA indicated that if SAR Alberta was to come under the Solicitor General, than SAR Alberta would probably no longer have access to the training grant. Mr. Caleffi phoned me the week before SAR Alberta's AGM to make me aware of this. What the Solicitor General's office was bring to the table for search and rescue was extremely generous, but provisions for the \$150,000 training had not be made because it was thought that money was still going to come from the EMA grant. Mr. Caleffi was uncertain how to proceed and did not want to jeopardize the training fund. I called the President of SAR Alberta and let him know all of this before the AGM so it could be addressed at the meeting.

Following all this I decided, on my own, to write a letter to the Premier. The letter is attached.

The Letter

I take full responsibility for this letter. I did not ask the board of SAR Alberta's permission to send it and up until the conference they had no know idea it had been sent. I did discuss it with the President and did give a copy to Rodney Dietrich before he became President. I did say if he wanted to say the letter came just from me that was fine. He has recently done that in an email.

Following the letter I received a call from the new Executive Director of the new Emergency Management Agency Mr. Dave Hodgins. He explained he had seen the letter and was very passionate about search and rescue and wanted to sort this issue out. We talked for about an hour and I sent him the business plan I had done for the Solicitor General. He mentioned a couple of times that he would like to see SAR under the EMA , I stated I did not agree and that search and rescue should stay with the Solicitor General. It was a very pleasant meeting, he noted he was meeting with someone from the Solicitor General's office later in the week. I hung up thinking I had made my point, and that Mr. Hodgins was simply sorting out the grant and looking for a better way to work with the Solicitor General. I was mistaken.

When I returned from holidays two weeks later Mr. Hodgins called with an update to very politely tell me search and rescue was going over to his department. At the time I didn't say anything because I was so stunned. Apparently he had been talking to someone at SAR Alberta, the RMCP and a few other people, and with someone from the Solicitor General and the decision was made.

I called back the next day saying I did not agree that search and rescue should fall under Municipal Affairs and Housing and made my point rather forcefully. Mr. Hodgins explained that it was felt search and rescue's ties to government are through their municipalities and that is how it falls under Municipal Affairs. We both left the conversation frustrated and entrenched in our positions.

I finally received the letter from the Premier just this week stating that EMA would be taking over search and rescue. Seems the SAR Alberta Executive saw it before I did. The letter states their were discussions between the two ministries, it was determined Municipal Affairs and Housing was in the best position to support search and rescue groups in the communities across Alberta, and that the creation of the Alberta Emergency Management Agency "is going to allow for greater involvement, while continuing the grant program through the municipalities in support of search and rescue."

It also says Dave Hodgins reviewed the business plan and that "this document would form the basis of discussions between the agency and Search and Rescue Association of Alberta regarding this important activity." For clarity this is the business plan that I wrote, for the Solicitor General.

If you would like a copy of the business plan, I will send you the original one I wrote.

To make a point clear, I think Executive Director Dave Hodgins is a very proactive guy, who took this issue to heart and really feels he can make a difference. It was my mistake to not be clearer from the beginning and I think he acted in good faith. I have no doubt he will try and do the best job he can and I know he is very committed to working with search and rescue. Unfortunately, that's not the point, Municipal Affairs and Housing is not the appropriate ministry for search and rescue. I have attached a document outlining why SAR Alberta was dealing with the Solicitor General in the first place and why it needs to stay there.

The Case for the Solicitor General

To summarize the reason that SAR Alberta has tried to get the Solicitor General to be the lead ministry for the last number of years is that search and rescue is first and foremost a policing issue. The Sol Gen is the only ministry that has ability to affect policing policy. EMA does not have the political clout to deal with policing issues and though there are some dedicated, supportive personalities at the table now, search and rescue has seen over and over the consequences of deals made based on personalities alone.

SAR Alberta

The Executive of SAR Alberta is meeting (or has met) with representatives from the RCMP and EMA et al. this week on this issue. After that time they will have some more answers.

I have not been told I was taken off the committee to deal with the lead ministry issue, however, the fact that no one from SAR Alberta has bothered to contact me or keep me in the loop as to what SAR Alberta is now doing, is probably a good indication that someone has made the decision I no longer need to be there.

I must say that the philosophy of the SAR Alberta board and in particular the executive on how information is disseminated to the members of SAR Alberta has bothered me for some time. The protocol as it has evolved seems to be that the executive is the gate keeper of information and that if it is not vetted and properly controlled by the executive then the membership shouldn't have it. It is so bad that your board members find things out only after it is vetted by the executive and position taken. This has been going on for years and needs to stop.

The board and the board members should be running the business of SAR Alberta, not a few people sitting on the executive.

(In fairness I think Reese Woolsey tried very hard to change this philosophy but I fear it is once again well and deeply entrenched.)

Your entire board should have been at the meetings with the EMA and the RCMP and who ever else is going to be there. Your board does not answer to your executive - your executive answers to your board and your board should have been involved in all of this right from the start.

At some point over the years the idea that the executive controls the information and then directs the board in reaction to it, has become SAR Alberta's way of being. In fact, what I have seen is that anytime one of your board members simply asks a question of the executive or makes a suggestion they get told it was dealt with, being dealt with or they get jumped all over. The board members are only getting the information the executive wants them to get, when they want them to get it, and the governance model in place seems to be - the strongest personality wins. There is no leadership on policy, procedures, or mandates. I can see why there is little interest to sit on the SAR Alberta board.

The membership of SAR Alberta is as responsible as anyone else for this, while I know you did not sign up for the politics when you joined search and rescue - politics are a part of it. The teams need to become more involved and get to know what is going on especially when the vote at meetings, the regions need to give clear direction to their representatives and support them in getting the information they need to make decisions and support them in those decisions.

You are facing the most important issue to affect search and rescue in the last 15 years and most of you didn't even know it was going on. It is not fair to sit back and say "we didn't have the information" you need to seek it out. There should have been questions from the membership during and after the AGM when the lead ministry issue wasn't on the agenda, there should have been questions about SAR Alberta's business plan, there should have been years of questions as to why SAR Alberta has no policies. **If you are going to have a say in how search and rescue runs in this province in the future you need to get involved now.**

The Situation Now

I may be naïve but I do not think this is a done deal. I think if SAR Alberta's membership wants to they can have great influence on this issue.

I am, on my own, (though with moral support from across the search and rescue community) continuing to pursue this matter politically. I think there are possibly other solutions out there that may work for everyone and that more people in the SAR community, ie parks, HUSAR, Calgary and Edmonton City police could be brought in to work on these options. Unfortunately, again, without clear and strong input and direction from its members I don't think SAR Alberta will press for that.

I recognize I pretty much created the entire situation and lead ministry switch by not being clearer in the beginning and will take responsibility for that. Having said that, I think I have accomplished more to establish a lead ministry for search and rescue in the last two months that SAR Alberta was able to do in 10 years.

What you can do

- ✚ Don't assume anything is a done deal and you have no say.
- ✚ Let the members in your team know what's going on, feel free to send this on. Explore the issues as a team and make some decisions as a team on this issue. If nothing else decide you are going to be better informed.
- ✚ Give your team reps at the regional level the information they need to discuss this issue and give them

clear direction as to the decisions they should make on behalf of your team. You need to have the board members take back control of the SAR Alberta board and you need SAR Alberta to start acting as a cohesive, professional well informed organization – which at the moment it is not.

- ✚ Make sure your regional reps have your backing, and make sure they get the information you need back to the regions. Honor the position the regional representatives have put themselves in to sit on the SAR Alberta board, it is a time consuming position and they are not always treated with the respect they deserve. Make the board of SAR Alberta relevant, informed and influential, give it the attention, respect and time it deserves.
- ✚ If your team feels strongly, write a letter to the two Ministers involved – Solicitor General Fred Lindsay and Municipal Affairs and Housing Minister Ray Danyluk, their information is on the web.
- ✚ Write the Premier (be clearer than I was ,,,)
- ✚ Call, email or send a letter to your MLA.
- ✚ Talk to your municipality find out what they think.
- ✚ Make sure you get all the information you need – demand it.
- ✚ Please do not wait around for someone to tell you how it is going to be, get your team together and get your voices heard, no matter what options you choose, act.
- ✚ You deserve to have a great provincial organization that stands up for you, negotiates on your behalf, that treats its members with respect and makes its members feel like they are important. I hope above all else you work toward that.

Thank you again for your consideration and time.

Monica