

Office of the Premier
Room 307, Legislature Building
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May 24, 2007

RE: Lead Ministry for Search and Rescue

Dear Premier Stelmach,

It is with regret that I find myself having to write you this letter. I had hoped that any initial correspondence I would be having with you on the subject of search and rescue in Alberta would be a positive one. However, an ongoing situation between search and rescue and the Alberta government has reached the point of the ridiculous and it needs to be dealt with.

For over 10 years now search and rescue has been looking for a lead ministry within the Alberta government, and over the course of that 10 years the ministries of the Solicitor General and Public safety and Municipal Affairs and Housing, have bounced search and rescue around like a hot potato. Finally, last July Minister Harvey Cenaiko approached Search and Rescue Alberta (the provincial association) and offered to have the Solicitor General become the lead ministry for search and rescue.

The offer was: that the Solicitor General would provide administrative support to search and rescue; and it would be negotiated with the Emergency Management Agency, under Municipal Affairs and Housing, that search and rescue continue to access the training grants currently supplied by EMA. Following the change in cabinet, Solicitor General Fred Lindsay met with myself, as past-President of SARVAC and SAR Alberta, SAR Alberta President Reese Woolsey and another past-President of SAR Alberta, Paul Olmstead. At that time the Solicitor General re-confirmed the commitment of his department and things seemed to be rolling along.

However, Emergency Management has now indicated that they will not continue with the \$150,000 grant if search and rescue comes under the Solicitor General. Considering that ground search and rescue in Alberta is now the largest single response resource that smaller municipalities have to use in a major disaster, and that one of the prime directives of Emergency Management is to support municipalities in their disaster response capabilities, removing this grant makes little sense. It is particularly annoying in light of the fact that the search and rescue volunteers of Alberta have saved municipal governments and the provincial government millions if not tens of millions of dollars over their 16 year of operation. A conservative estimate of the dollar value volunteers search and

rescue brought to the Pine Lake Tornado alone is over \$3 million, and that does not include the gear and equipment they brought with them.

To be frank the relationship between volunteer search and rescue and Emergency Management has not served anyone well. Though there are a few individuals within the organization who have tried to work with search and rescue, the overall tone of the agency has been less than useful.

The lack of any meaningful relationship between these two organizations has had ripple affects that reach to a national level. There is a federal organization known as the GSAR council that meets regularly to discuss national issues of search and rescue and disaster response. The council is made up of representatives from each provincial government, the RCMP and provincial police forces. Though EMA has traditionally sent someone to this council, SAR Alberta has never recognized EMA's right to do so, so EMA has never truly represented the search and rescue volunteers of Alberta. As well, SAR Alberta has missed out on many opportunities to access federal money because most proposals need to first go through their provincial government.

Now there is concern from those working on the lead ministry issue, within the Solicitor General's office, that SAR Alberta will lose its ability to access training money, and they do not want to put SAR Alberta into that position. So SAR Alberta heads into its conference and annual general meeting this weekend, once again having to tell its members that the issue of its lead ministry is on hold because of the inability of your government to work together.

In fairness to Municipal Affairs and Housing Minister Ray Danyluk, I am sure he is not fully aware of this situation. However, it does now need to be addressed, and obviously at the highest level of government, as ten years of trying to sort it out through other channels simply has not worked. It is also important to note that the RCMP, the lead tasking agency needs to play an important role in all discussions.

This will also be my last attempt to sort this out within the government of Alberta before making the issue a public one. The first Minister I met with over search and rescue and provincial support was Brian Evans over 13 years ago - there really is no excuse for things to have dragged on this long. The lack of meaningful government support has negatively affected search and rescue in Alberta, with morale dropping and volunteers leaving, as they see little respect from the government that they have served so well.

I am putting my faith in you that the key players can be brought to the table, in short order, to establish a lead Ministry for search and rescue and create a strong working relationship between volunteer search and rescue and the Alberta government - that works for all. I am more than happy to provide you with any

further background information you need or documentation you require to proceed with this issue.

Thank you for your time and consideration. I look forward to discussing this issue with you in the near future.

Sincerely,

Monica Ahlstrom
Founding President SAR Alberta
Past- President Search and Rescue Volunteer Association of Canada

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CC: Minister Fred Lindsay
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