

Search and Rescue Association of Alberta (SAR Alberta)

submission to the

Government of Alberta

on

Provincial Challenges to Search and Rescue

October 2002

The following are a list of concerns, barriers and challenges, currently faced by the search and rescue community in Alberta, in its attempts to sustain and develop the service delivery it provides to the citizens and visitors of our province.

No clear legislated mandate as to which provincial ministry is responsible for what aspects of Search And Rescue (SAR).

Alberta is one of the few provinces in Canada that does not clearly mandate one provincial ministry with the primary responsibility for search and rescue. It is true in most provinces that more than one area of their provincial government is involved in search and rescue, but overall responsibilities are centered in one ministry so as to minimize confusion. However in Alberta, it appears that search and rescue falls in a "grey area" between the Solicitor General because of law enforcement's default role in SAR, and Alberta Municipal Affairs because of the role the Disaster Services Branch has filled in enabling WCB coverage, training grant funding and acting as a bridge to municipalities.

Lack of definition of what constitutes the activities of "search and rescue" in Alberta, and how these activities differ from or integrate with existing mandated roles of other emergency services.

Provision of off-road medical assistance, water rescue and slope rescue in or near urban centres are but three areas that have had SAR teams at odds with fire departments or ambulance services. Approaches to these sorts of responses tend not to be planned out but rather based on a past where no SAR teams previously existed. Police have a tendency to allow anyone to command these types of incidents because they are unsure of their role. Only in the case where a fatality is known or assumed do police take charge.

Most large urban centres have identified perimeters for their municipal-based emergency services, but there is no province-wide consistent approach to this area. These situations are mitigated sometimes at a local level where all the emergency services get along and meet regularly and discuss areas of mutual interest. However SAR teams respond regular outside their local area so this type of mechanism is of little value, even when it does occur.

Confusion regarding the role of law enforcement with SAR, both in operational and administrative activities.

It is SAR Alberta's assessment that law enforcement is only "considered" to have the mandate for SAR response in Alberta. Justice Minister Dave Hancock reiterates this statement in a past letter to the Search and Rescue Dog Association of Alberta. This considered mandate is not by design but by default. SAR Alberta has been unable to find any legislation, reference by contract or agreement or any other legal means which identifies and defines law enforcement's role relating to search and rescue, other than the responsibilities to investigate missing persons.

Within the loosest interpretation, this potentially could be extended to emergency searches, but does not explain the law enforcement's role with respect to humanitarian rescues with no criminal aspects. We do

not dispute the role of law enforcement when SAR teams are strictly performing fatality recoveries or evidence gathering, however the relationship still needs to be defined even during these activities.

Also even though the RCMP is responsible for provincial policing in Alberta and probably responds to more SAR incidents than any other government agency in our province, they are not the only agency involved. The number of autonomous municipal and First Nations police forces only continues to increase in our province. Therefore any clarification of law enforcement's role in SAR needs to encompass all police forces, not just the RCMP.

No provincial agreement between the Province of Alberta, law enforcement agencies, municipalities and SAR organizations defining relationships, including aspects such as liability, loss coverage, billing, resource activation, grievances, etc.

Other provinces, such as New Brunswick and Nova Scotia, have provincial agreements in place to define the roles, responsibilities and accountability of all major stakeholders involved in the delivery of search and rescue services. These formal arrangements have addressed previous authority and control issues within their provinces, enabling a more effective and efficient approach to their service delivery. Here in Alberta because we do not have such an agreement, therefore our service delivery suffers from power struggles, agency dominated resource development causing redundancy and inconsistency, and loss of available resources through isolation and lack of support.

Federal government appears to be determining which provincial ministry is representing Alberta at national meetings, instead of our own provincial government making this determination.

The National Search Secretariat targeted Alberta Municipal Affairs' Disaster Services Branch for our provincial representation by default originally when the Secretariat was first formed. Even though law enforcement plays a considerable role in SAR, it appears that the Solicitor General has served no role to this point, in representing Alberta on the national level. The national SAR community operates under the assumption that our Disaster Services Branch is the lead government agency for SAR in Alberta.

No provincial plan for sustaining and developing SAR service delivery in Alberta.

Over the past 15 years, the Alberta Government has placed considerable effort in diversifying our provincial economy particularly noting the investments in our tourism industry. Added to this are national promotions for citizens to live an active lifestyle (reducing health care costs), and the interest in the environment. Subsequently there has been a tremendous influx of new and different users of the outdoors, but there was never any provincial consideration put towards what type of emergency response infrastructure needed to be in place to protect the citizens and visitors of our province in their outdoor pursuits.

However during this time as well, is when organized search and rescue resources sprang up all over the province. It was because of the inability of existing emergency services (by no fault of their own) to meet these new and growing service delivery needs, that local communities created SAR teams. In many cases, this was a grassroots response to a local incident that was lagged by problems, and in some cases a fatality possibly preventable through a more adequate response. These grassroots SAR Teams have done well to rise up to meet and exceed local expectations, but as with the provision of any other core government service, a provincial plan is the only way to sustain and grow to meet changing needs and expectations.

No current mechanism for various government agencies in Alberta, charged with response to SAR incidents, to convene and work co-operatively on a provincial basis.

Since SAR Alberta was formed in 1994 and apart from the indirect opportunities provided through annual SAR conferences we host each year (which attendance is voluntary, not mandatory), at no time have all the government agencies responsible for SAR ever met or even corresponded with one another, as far as we know. One of the reasons why SAR Alberta was created, was so that the RCMP and Disaster Services didn't have to keep trying to correspond with all the SAR resources in the province on a individual basis. The civilian SAR Teams understood the value in not only providing this "one window approach" to the government through SAR Alberta, but the inherent benefits of working together for common purposes. Now it is the government agencies turn to stop working in isolation.

No provincial standards for search and rescue in Alberta, which are accepted by all provincial stakeholders.

There are SAR standards in existence in Alberta. Our provincial association has standards, some law enforcement agencies have standards, even many individual SAR teams have standards, but there is no provincial standard. We refute the concept of leaving it up to the various law enforcement or other government agencies to identify their own standards cause this only creates agency-dominated resources, not efficiency. Imagine being a SAR Team who regularly responds to incidents for the RCMP, and a large urban municipal police force. Should they have to train and perform their skills to two different levels depending on who they are working for that day? This type of approach would be unacceptable in most other industries, but is currently in existence in Alberta when it comes to search and rescue.

Confusion regarding provincial WCB coverage for SAR teams, in particular during non-operational activities.

Worker Compensation Board coverage, administered through Disaster Services, is considered to apply to SAR operations and training. Confusion starts with how that is achieved, and extends to SAR volunteer activities that are not operational or training related. What about volunteers who deliver preventative education to their communities, fundraise to purchase emergency equipment, attend meetings out of town, etc? Where does the coverage end, and is that appropriate considering the costs of involvement the volunteers bear?

Government agencies insufficiently acknowledging responding SAR resources by name and role during emergency operations, when providing information to media.

SAR teams don't respond for the glory, but a lack of acknowledgement does have considerable negative consequences on revenue generation to sustain service delivery. A considerable amount of funding for search and rescue occurs at a local level. If local communities are not provided the information to validate their investment in SAR, there are numerous other good charities locally to which a donator can give their money to and receive confirmation that their investment had a positive impact on their community.

Secondly, is the negative impact on volunteer morale when their SAR Team (not to be confused with them individually), doesn't receive fair credit for their role, by having their SAR team identified by name. Volunteers make not work for money, but they sure don't work to have someone else take exclusive credit for their efforts.

Lack of provincial acknowledgement regarding the share of SAR service delivery being directly funded by SAR organization and their individual members.

No one has accurate data regarding many aspects of search and rescue in our province, including who is paying. However it is our submission that overall in Alberta, the structure and delivery of search and rescue services for our province are annually funded in approximately three equal ways:

1. Government Funding (national, provincial, municipal)- employee wages, actual operational costs, grants, etc.
2. SAR Team Funding - provision of SAR equipment and resources, pre-deployment preparedness, absorption of non-reimbursed expenses, preventative education, training coordination, administration, etc.
3. SAR Volunteers - personal protective clothing, training, lost income, travel costs, etc.

We think that our province strongly believes in the concept of those that pay a fair share should also be entitled to a fair say in how a service is delivered. It is our submission that SAR Teams and their individual members do pay a fair share of a core government service, but yet are marginalized from key decision-making by our provincial government and law enforcement agencies because they are volunteers.

CONCLUSION

Unlike other emergency services, we do not have a legislated or a municipality-authorized mandate. Yet society would consider us to be an essential service. Other provincial SAR associations have threatened their provincial governments with denial of service to bring about change, however we in Alberta would rather work co-operatively with our provincial government and other stakeholders to address the challenges before us all relating to the provision of emergency search and rescue services.

Lastly, it should be noted that throughout this entire list of concerns stated, at no time has the Search and Rescue Association of Alberta stated that the fix to the challenges before us is money from the Province of Alberta, or anyone else for that matter. Although we would welcome any investment in our provincial SAR structure and service delivery for Alberta, we nevertheless truly believe that much could be accomplished to remove the barriers currently before us without anyone's budget getting overhauled. We look forward to working with all to enable this to occur.