

**REPORT OF THE  
VIRGINIA DEPARTMENT OF EMERGENCY SERVICES**

**ADMINISTRATION STUDY:  
STUDY OF SEARCH AND  
RESCUE EFFORTS IN THE  
COMMONWEALTH OF  
VIRGINIA**

**TO THE GOVERNOR AND  
THE GENERAL ASSEMBLY OF VIRGINIA**



**HOUSE DOCUMENT NO. 45**

**COMMONWEALTH OF VIRGINIA  
RICHMOND  
1999**



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## **I. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

House Joint Resolution 185 of the 1998 Session of the General Assembly requests the Secretary of Public Safety to study Search and Rescue (SAR) efforts in the Commonwealth. This is to determine the appropriate level of funding therefore. The Secretary of Public Safety has directed the Virginia Department of Emergency Services (VDES) to be the lead agency for this study. The study focuses on response coordination and training for missing persons in ground search and rescue, in wilderness, rural, urban and suburban environments and the coordination of air search for missing person and aircraft. Disaster/Urban SAR, Trench/Technical Rescue, and Swift Water Rescue are specifically not addressed because their dispatch has not traditionally come under the supervision of the VDES or the general search and rescue community.

### **Major Points of the Study**

- Search and Rescue has been part of the duties of the Department of Emergency Services since 1975. At that time, during the renewing of the state and federal SAR agreement, it was generally agreed among the other state agencies that the (then) Office of Emergency Services should serve as state SAR coordinator. It would be responsible for the operations, planning, and organization of SAR in Virginia. This statement was added to the formal agreement presented to the Executive Agent for Inland SAR and signed by Governor Mills E. Godwin, Jr. However, it was not until the appointment of an overall program coordinator in 1989 that the current program began to take shape. This current program includes training for volunteers and local and state public safety personnel who perform foot search, man tracking or signcutting, incident management, semi-technical rescue including cave rescue, mounted (horse) search, and dog handling. The program manager selects, plans and coordinates these courses based on standards developed by the search community. Training courses offered by VDES are designed around a set of standards to promote professional, effective response. These standards were developed for VDES by the volunteer SAR community. They are based on guidance and expertise from the American Society for the Testing of Materials (ASTM), American Search Dog Association, and the National Cave Rescue Commission. Also used in standards development were existing group standards and works from various published authors on the subjects of lost person search and survival. Some guidance was also used from the National Association of Search and Rescue (NASAR); however, their standards and guidelines were published after many of the standards in Virginia had already been published. Standards developed in Virginia along with documents from other states and authors were used in the development of NASAR's publications. The program manager is also responsible for the agency planning function of coordination and response for the SAR program. This includes the writing and revision of the State Emergency Operations Plan annex and the agency's Standard Operations Procedure annex for Search and Rescue. The program manager is also responsible for the identification,

coordination, and operational response of SAR resources during day-to-day operations and in declared emergencies.

- Volunteer searchers expend an average of 20,000 man-hours per year on SAR incidents across the state. This volunteer service equates to an estimated saving for local and state government of at least \$300,000 per year.
- Training is offered by the VDES to all SAR volunteers and local and state public safety personnel on a funds-available basis. Training sessions are consistently full with overflow students being assigned to waiting lists or turned away. Potential students may have to apply several times before they are accepted into a class due to the large numbers of students applying and the limitations on class size to ensure effective training.
- Training has created the ability for resources to work together for the common good of the missing or injured person. This is evidenced by the fact that many different disciplines of search come together to form a cohesive unit at any search. Many of the jurisdictional Responsible Agents are unaware that these groups are separate units. This phenomenon is seldom repeated in other states, even ones who also formally recognize their SAR volunteers. Virginia is considered a leader in standardized training for SAR resources across the country and has been asked by other states and countries to share particulars of its program on many occasions.

Training is offered at no charge to the student to minimize large out-of-pocket expenses already incurred by the volunteer providers. Training by the state also ensures a standard response by all responders allowing all resources to learn consistent effective search and search management techniques. This minimizes confusion during SAR operations and provides for a quicker, more effective response among state and local public safety personnel as well as volunteer search and rescue personnel. Also, vital search information is preserved and properly documented.

- Search and rescue training requires intensive use of equipment. Special equipment such as climbing rope and hardware, webbing, and rescue litters is essential in teaching technical and semi-technical rescue. This skill is of the utmost importance for effective, efficient, and safe rescue of the victim. It also ensures protection of the responder, especially in mountainous terrain where much of Virginia's outdoor recreation is located and many of its searches occur. The equipment used in providing this training must be maintained at a reasonable standard to insure the safety of the student. Limited training funds do not allow for proper maintenance and satisfaction of all requested training.
- Basic records on search response and training of personnel are kept by VDES. Recording of tactical data is left to the on-scene personnel. Minimum staffing and funding inhibit the capturing of more extensive data by the VDES. Additional data capturing would allow VDES to better develop quantitative information on the effectiveness of state SAR training.

This would presumably lead to improvements in search training that would enhance capabilities, and thus result in better protection of the lost person. This would also minimize legal exposure to jurisdictional and state public safety personnel. It would also allow for better evaluation of procedure in response coordination and the use of volunteer responders.

- Based on national trends and an evaluation of SAR operations in the Commonwealth, the Virginia Search and Rescue Council which is made up of volunteer and career responders, has asserted that standards of operations, state sponsored training and a coordinated response are necessary to ensure consistent quality of response to and care for the citizens and visitors of the Commonwealth.
- Based on high profile searches in Virginia since 1989, such as the Manassas Aircraft Search in 1990 and the search for the Lisk sisters in Spotsylvania County in 1997, a certain expectation for SAR response has developed on the part of local governments, media and general public. The local governments expect to receive competent professional help from the state when they can no longer support the search with local personnel. Media expects to receive accurate and honest answers to their inquiries. The general public and family expect the jurisdiction and the state to do all it can to professionally conduct the search and provide a correct conclusion. Coordinated response and training have helped to meet these expectations.
- Current VDES SAR program staffing consists of one full-time employee and limited part-time administrative assistance.
- SAR expertise within VDES is often not available in its full capacity during responses due to the requirement to administer to other aspects of the program.
- Based on training data and reported group retention since 1989, the SAR training program needs to train approximately 300 volunteers per year at the basic skill level to keep up with normal turnover in the avocation and provide an adequate response for local governments requesting SAR resources. During the state fiscal year of 1997-1998 the SAR program was able to train an overall total of 227 SAR responders; however, this included local and state public safety personnel as well as volunteers. Limited funding and staff has made it difficult to train enough volunteers and also meet the needs and in some cases requirements of local government and state agencies for this training. Volunteers and state and local government personnel currently must compete for the same class space.
- Volunteer response suffers significantly from the lack of available trained personnel. Volunteer resources are especially inadequate in searches that last over 24 hours. While potential additional personnel are available, applicants are routinely declined or put on a waiting list due to limitations in class offerings and size.

- VDES currently conducts two basic SAR courses a year, and conducts courses every one or two years for more specialized resources. However, the needs and the expectations of the responders, volunteer and professional, have continued to expand as they find the courses offered by VDES to be professional, educational, and pertinent to their jobs.
- Unlike volunteer emergency medical personnel or firefighters who pay for some personal expenses but have resources like vehicles, major equipment, and maintenance usually financed by a central organization or jurisdiction, SAR responders continue to pay entirely for their response. As an example, SAR volunteers reported often spending between \$5,000 and \$10,000 of their personal funds per year to respond to searches. This does vary depending on how often the volunteer is available to respond. This money pays for items including gasoline and oil, tolls, vehicle maintenance, and the upkeep and training of animals used in search and rescue. It also pays for veterinarian bills and special outdoor survival and search and rescue equipment. This does not include any time missed from work that is not compensated. Search work is not scheduled and responders must often leave at a moment's notice to respond to the call to assist in a missing person incident. Often they must travel across the state to reach the search. Limits in personal funding have, at times, limited the responder's ability to assist in a search. This, in turn, effects the state and local jurisdictions' ability to get trained resources to the scene of an incident, especially when the needed resource is a specialized one. Response by the volunteers would be enhanced by the addition of an operational response budget to reimburse volunteer responders for some out-of-pocket expenses incurred during an authorized SAR incident.
- Since planning, training, and operations of this program are all the responsibility of one FTE, increased staffing in training and administration will allow additional focus on program development and maintenance without neglecting the day-to-day operational activities of the program.

### **Recommendations**

- **The SAR Program, administered by VDES, be allocated an additional position of one full-time employee to serve as training officer to work under the program coordinator. In addition, this program be allocated an administrative budget of \$15,000 annually to be used by the SAR Program Coordinator and staff to make scheduled and unscheduled visits to volunteer SAR groups across the state. Visits would assess the readiness of the volunteer SAR groups for SAR response and assist them in correcting deficits, if needed, in becoming ready for response. This money may also be spent by the staff to assist local jurisdictions in setting up SAR programs in their area.**
- **The SAR Program continue to employ the part-time Program Support Technician and review the position bi-annually for the need to upgrade to full-time as the program grows.**



- **Funding for training allocation in this program should be increased from \$75,000 annually to \$100,000 annually. This money is to be used in a scheduled update of training materials and equipment, the training of volunteers, and in increasing course offerings to the jurisdictional and state personnel without taking training opportunities away from the volunteers.**
- **An additional allocation of \$25,000 annually to the SAR response activity to reimburse volunteers for specific out-of-pocket expenses. This money to be administered and claims reviewed by the SAR Coordinator.**
- **Investigate the need for an additional study to be conducted by an independent study group to review training, coordination, and response in the disciplines of Disaster/Urban SAR, Technical/Trench Rescue, and Swift Water Rescue.**

## **II. INTRODUCTION TO SEARCH AND RESCUE PROGRAM**

### ***A. Overview***

The Search and Rescue (SAR) Program is currently coordinated by the Virginia Department of Emergency Services (VDES). This program includes the response, coordination, and training for missing persons search, for ground SAR, in wilderness, rural, urban and suburban environments, and the coordination of air search for missing persons and aircraft. This is the focus of the current study. VDES currently does not coordinate, on a regular basis, or conduct any training for, Disaster/Urban SAR, Technical Rescue or Swift Water Rescue. These skills have been traditionally taught and coordinated by the fire service and emergency medical services and are often part of a jurisdictional response. Although these disciplines conduct vital operations that sometimes overlap with the SAR response coordinated by VDES, this particular study will not specifically address these disciplines. These disciplines should be the focus of an additional future study to look at funding, staffing, training and coordination and to perhaps consider some consolidation of training and coordination in these responses.

### ***B. Program Background***

#### **1. Operations**

VDES is designated as the state's emergency coordinating agency by Title 44, Chapter 3.2, the Commonwealth of Virginia's Emergency Services and Disaster Laws. This has traditionally included the coordination of many resources including volunteer SAR resources used to support local government emergency operations. Since the early 1980's, VDES has, on a regular basis, formally and informally tracked the extent of SAR incidents throughout the Commonwealth. In 1989 recognition of this fact and of the need for coordination of planning, training, and operations of this activity prompted VDES to seek General Assembly appointment of a designated SAR Coordinator and to begin to establish a more formal system of coordination and training for volunteers. Except for the appointment of the coordinator, the SAR Program has continued to grow without study or scheduled funding review.

The resources that VDES currently coordinates include trained volunteer teams who perform foot search, man tracking or signcutting, incident management, technical and semi-technical rescue (including cave rescue), mounted search, and dog handling, (which includes using air scent or tracking/trailing dogs.) Local governments, typically the chief law enforcement officers, are responsible for missing person SAR operations in their jurisdiction, within the scope of local capability, and support SAR in adjacent jurisdictions when requested, and in accordance with existing local agreements and abilities. Tactical decisions during SAR operations have traditionally been the responsibility of the chief law enforcement officer of the particular jurisdiction regardless of experience or training in SAR. Requests for state SAR assistance to a locality come from the local SAR coordinator who is most often the chief law enforcement officer of that jurisdiction, or from the local Emergency

Services Coordinator. This assistance may include technical advice, but most often is in the form of additional resources. Local jurisdictions have traditionally not had the manpower and funding to develop local expertise in specific SAR disciplines. Smaller, less-fiscally-secure jurisdictions have come to depend totally on the use of state coordinated resources in response to their legal responsibility for search. Although local resources are typically the first responders to a SAR incident, they must train for the day-to-day activities of the jurisdiction. Funding, manpower, and workload make training local resources for the less frequent SAR incident, which uses different tactics than criminal search, impractical in many jurisdictions. However, when the SAR incident presents itself, it is no less important a mission to that jurisdiction; trained SAR resources coordinated by VDES become key in the accomplishment of this mission for many jurisdictions. Because VDES is a state coordinating agency for emergency response, jurisdictions expect to come to it for assistance in resource deficits, including SAR.

Volunteer searchers expend an average of 20,000 man-hours per year responding to search incidents across the state. In man-hours alone, this is a savings of over \$300,000 (based on the hourly rate of SAR adjunct instructors) to the Commonwealth and its jurisdictions per year. This does not include the substantial cost of equipment the volunteers bring to a search and the use of their vehicles (including mileage) during a search. None of this expense is reimbursed by the Commonwealth or the jurisdictions. Replacement of broken or lost equipment has largely been the burden of the volunteers, even though work was being done in the name of the locality, VDES, and the Commonwealth.

In accordance with the Memorandum of Understanding (MOU), signed by the United States Air Force which is the Executive Agent for Inland SAR and the Commonwealth of Virginia and as stated in The Commonwealth of Virginia Emergency Operations Plan (COVEOP), in the case of intrastate missing aircraft, VDES is the lead agency in obtaining and coordinating resources until the aircraft is found. At that time, if it is determined to be a crash in the Commonwealth of Virginia, the Virginia State Police become the lead investigative agency. Other jurisdictions are asked to assist as needed in the search phase or the investigative phase. Aircraft incidents are handled in this manner because of the potential for multiple jurisdictional involvement and may require the coordination and cooperation of public safety personnel in several jurisdictions in addition to other local, state and federal agencies.

## **2. Training**

Training by the state is offered to all volunteer groups and jurisdictions based upon funding and staff availability. Typically, state training sessions are always full and often students must be turned away or put on a space available waiting list due to funding limitations. Requests for training have increased as additional responders find a need for this type of training to satisfy legal and operational issues affecting their jurisdictions.

This training has created the ability for resources to work together for the common good of the missing or injured subject. Groups are able to communicate and integrate efficiently to create a professional SAR environment through their shared knowledge, common forms, and the utilization of consistent standards for performing various activities. SAR training is currently offered by VDES in the disciplines of Field Team Member, Field Team Leader, Incident Command and Field Team Signcutter. There are also workshops for air scent search dogs, adjunct instructors, and incident staff.

VDES sponsored courses are offered to the students at no charge. They are offered this way to ensure consistent, quality training for all responders, increase the effectiveness of the searches, reduce Commonwealth and jurisdictional liability, and to reduce the cost of training for volunteer SAR personnel. It gives responders access to training without incurring significant additional cost. Training costs are kept low in the program by training many students at one time, the usage of state facilities, and the use of three-season camp facilities which are well suited for this type of training. SAR courses often have the lowest student-to-cost ratio of any training product in the agency; however, the quality of the courses remains high based on evaluations from students.

All VDES SAR training courses are designed around a set of standards for each discipline. Standards are developed by volunteer committees of SAR providers who work in or with the discipline for which they are writing standards. They are developed by consensus using already existing standards from groups in the state and nationally recognized guidelines from ASTM, the American Search Dog Association, National Cave Rescue and others. They are then recommended to VDES by the committee, through the SAR Program, and are used as the basis for the development of SAR training. These standards promote a professional, effective response as noted by users in the field. SAR standards are not currently part of the Code of Virginia; and although recommended for all SAR groups to use as their basic standard, compliance cannot be required of the groups. However, it is expected that every group who enters into an agreement with VDES to respond statewide will meet or exceed these standards. The agreement or Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) process is the authorizing element for providing worker's compensation coverage and liability from the state to the groups.

### **3. Records**

Only basic records on searches are kept by VDES. These records are limited to non-automated records which include a brief description of the problem and minimal subject information. Resources, whose response is coordinated by VDES, are also recorded to assist with risk management concerns. A brief description of the outcome is also recorded; however, details are dependent on what the local government Responsible Agent is willing to release to the VDES. Volunteer staff are asked to provide as much after-action information as they have gathered or received. However, compliance is often limited by information released to them or approved for release by the Responsible Agent who is ultimately responsible for the search activities. There is no law or requirement

for the jurisdiction to report any information concerning the search (or even the search itself) to VDES. VDES may be unaware of ongoing searches for several days until the jurisdiction is depleted of resources and requests additional coordination from the state. Not knowing about the search beforehand causes delays in getting additional resources to the scene to properly relieve exhausted local searchers. This delay can put the lost person in jeopardy by causing responding resources to lose vital hours of effective search time in travel to the search. If the search is known about before additional resources are requested, ongoing conversations can be had with the Responsible Agent and on-scene searchers to assist them in planning for the use of outside resources in a more timely and efficient manner.

Since tactical operations are developed on-scene by jurisdictional and on-scene search personnel, VDES is not always given tactical search data on missing person searches. Some tactical information is gathered and kept by the volunteer groups when they respond and might be obtained from their files. No requirement exists to keep such data and standard forms are not required. Debriefing of searches is generally done on scene by the responding groups and the Responsible Agent requesting the assistance.

Recordkeeping by VDES is limited because of staffing limitations and the lack of a requirement for the jurisdictions or volunteers to report any search activities. For those that are reported, information is generally limited to the administrative side of the operation, usually confined to information needed by the responding volunteers to get to the incident. Additional reporting requirements of SAR incidents by the jurisdictions to VDES would be helpful. This would assist in the allocation of resources in case there are multiple searches. It could also decrease response time by the volunteers if they are needed by putting them on alert to a possible response. It would also assist VDES in evaluating the effectiveness of the program, and ensure reporting for proper risk management procedures and of volunteers utilized.

### **III. OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY**

This study focused on the need for additional staffing and funding for the SAR Program. Specific issues addressed are:

- Current staffing levels and their effects on training, response, and documentation.
- Current funding and its impact on training, administration, and search outcomes.
- Current training needs of the volunteers, and training impact on liability for volunteer searchers and the Commonwealth of Virginia.
- Need for additional documentation of searches.
- Training effects on the outcome of the search.
- Recommendations for funding and staff development.

### **IV. STUDY METHODOLOGY**

Data collected for this study included:

- Structured surveys received from jurisdictions.
- Information from reports and papers written by the SAR coordinator.
- SAR records kept by the Virginia Emergency Operations Center (VEOC).
- Code of Virginia.
- Information from the Virginia Search and Rescue Council.

### **V. STUDY ORGANIZATION**

House Joint Resolution 185 of the 1998 Session of the General Assembly directed the Secretary of Public Safety to study the SAR efforts in the Commonwealth and determine the appropriate level of state funding. VDES served as the lead agency in this study. VDES used information from the Virginia Search and Rescue Council and SAR groups involved in this council. It also used information previously written by the SAR Program Coordinator in the Commonwealth. Funding and staffing issues are detailed in separate sections for each area.

## **VI. LEGAL CONSIDERATIONS**

### ***A. Current References to Search and Rescue (SAR) in the Code of Virginia***

Currently, SAR work is mentioned in five different sections of the Code of Virginia. They are §28.2-100, pertaining to the Virginia Marine Patrol's law enforcement responsibility, SAR, §44-146.28:1, pertaining to state responsibilities under the Emergency Management Assistance Compact, §46.2-746.6, referring to special license plates for SAR responders; and §65.2-101 and §65.2-101 V2, referring to worker's compensation for SAR volunteers responding as providers of SAR for their home jurisdiction or VDES. SAR organizations or individual responders are specifically mentioned in the Code of Virginia in four of those sections. Although these sections address the act of SAR as a part of the state or specific agency duty, the directives fall short of advocating or directing the use of standardized or recognized systems, training, or reporting which are vital to effective operation.

Training is specifically not addressed in the Code of Virginia. Unlike the volunteer Emergency Medical Services (EMS) community, SAR volunteers are not currently mandated to have any type of training or hold any type of mandatory certification. VDES has recommended standards for many of the disciplines in which the volunteer SAR provider participates. Any group responding under a MOU with VDES is required to meet these recognized standards as a risk management practice. This practice does help VDES in verifying initial training of groups entering the system, but VDES lacks the staff to monitor ongoing group training effectively. However, there is no mandated state standard for SAR group formation or performance. SAR groups can form and operate independently in the Commonwealth without meeting any standard.

### ***B. Training Issues***

Training by the state is offered to all volunteer groups and to all jurisdictional personnel as state money and resources are available. However, there is no mandatory requirement for training or for groups calling themselves SAR groups to seek any training, carry any sort of liability insurance or verify any sort of ability. There is an expectation from local and state public safety personnel to receive a professional SAR response, when requested.

There is currently no legislation for determining the level of training appropriate for responders, how they will receive this training, or who will be the oversight agency for determining if responders receive proper training.

#### **1. Need**

VDES believes that state-sponsored training is a necessity to ensure a consistent quality of response and care for the citizens of the Commonwealth. Virginia has led the way in developing state standards for disciplines that participate in wilderness SAR. The current need is to offer classes to

volunteers and jurisdictions on a statewide, consistent basis to ensure a standard of response and care.

Standardization of language and procedures between jurisdictions and the volunteers is critical to the mission response. Most jurisdictions are not prepared to sustain search operations past the first 12 to 24 hours. They must rely on volunteer response to continue effective operations. Standardized training and operations are imperative to preserve the continuity of operations and chain of evidence needed for successful conclusion of the search.

Although various groups and jurisdictions conduct some type of training, it was not until VDES began its training program that training was offered statewide in a formalized and dependable manner. All jurisdictions and volunteer groups have access to this standardized training. Jurisdictions and volunteers look to VDES to coordinate this training. They rely heavily on the state-sponsored training because outside training is seldom available and is usually too costly for volunteers who already are responsible for all costs associated with SAR response. Outside training for one course can cost a SAR responder over \$500 for the course plus per diem, and they may have to travel over 100 miles to attend the course. In addition, SAR responders may have to wait for long periods of time before training is offered close to their area. Basic training for SAR responders is offered by VDES at least twice a year on a regular basis and fills a void in wilderness SAR training that no other state or local department offers.

In a survey distributed to jurisdictions for this study, out of 67 jurisdictions responding, 50 reported having emergency services resources trained for SAR. Of those, 35 were trained by courses offered by the VDES and found this training useful.

## **2. Liability**

Based on high profile searches in Virginia since 1989, there has developed a high expectation for SAR from the jurisdictions, the media and the general public. This expectation is for quick, effective, efficient, and professional SAR response from local public safety responders and the volunteers. Training is the only way to meet this expectation. Without standards and training to meet those standards, measuring performance becomes increasingly difficult and the Commonwealth could become involved in litigation due to perceived improper or irregular handling of a search. In the past ten years, VDES has been occasionally asked to provide information pertaining to search tactics and management in several specific search incidents when aspects of these cases came under litigation. Having standards and formalized training has assisted in the state's credibility in those cases.



## **VII. STAFFING ISSUES**

### ***A. Current Staffing***

This program has one full-time employee assigned to act as planner, training coordinator and developer, and operational coordinator. This is unlike other divisions or programs in the agency like Technological Hazards or Emergency Management Training. Although the Technological Hazards Division supervises the planning, training and operations for its field personnel, no one employee is responsible for the entire workload. This division has specific employees to work on planning and mitigation, others for training coordination, and still others in charge of coordination for operational response matters. Although Emergency Management Training is part of Operations, this program's responsibility, on a day-to-day basis, is only to schedule, conduct and occasionally develop emergency management training. The Search and Rescue Program manager is also responsible for acting as an operations officer for the State EOC, that is to assist with other jurisdictional and state emergency matters when they arise. This employee is assigned during declared emergencies and VEOC augmentations, to the job of mission assignment and action tracking coordination. In addition, this person must supervise the coordination of search and rescue activities during those emergencies. This employee is responsible for developing the SAR portion of the COVEOP, the standard operating procedures for SAR coordination and response in the agency, and the development of the SAR training program for both the volunteers and state employees inside and outside of the agency. This person also supervises all record keeping procedures in the program. This program manager oversees deployment of SAR resources to meet jurisdictional need and supervises a staff of duty officers who coordinate jurisdictional SAR requests after-hours. This employee also supervises 13 adjunct instructors who assist in conducting training and one part-time program support technician who assists in the administration of the program. Duty officers are agency employees who work in other areas and volunteer for extra duty as SAR Duty Officers. This job rotates weekly and includes tours of duty by the SAR program coordinator. Adjunct instructors are part of the responding SAR community and are contracted to work, as available, for individual training events. Part-time administrative help is limited to 1,500 hours a year.

### ***B. Staffing Effects on Training***

With one full-time employee and limited part-time administrative assistance, even with additional training money, it is difficult to plan and administer training to meet the needs and demands of the volunteers, jurisdictions and state. Training development suffers because full-time and part-time staff are always involved in keeping up with current events, reports and training needs in the program. Development of a comprehensive training plan with updates for future need, is lacking due to inadequate staff time to develop it.

### ***C. Staffing Effects on Response***

Currently, almost all SAR responses coordinated by VDES are done by volunteer responders. Although the activity coordinator is a managerial expert in SAR, response is limited due to other duties previously explained. This creates problems on a limited number of searches based on political climate of the jurisdiction and nature of the search. The program has had to rely on agency personnel, such as regional coordinators, to assist volunteers who sometimes lack the political savvy and knowledge to handle large or sensitive searches. Search and rescue is not a scheduled part of these other employees duties and their availability is not always assured. Due to the program coordinator's other duties, the telephone is used extensively during these activities. However, problems that are missed or unrecognized due to the varying skill levels and experience of the responders, sometimes go unresolved over the telephone. This can complicate the search effort. The program recognizes these problems and is trying to develop and support additional training for volunteer incident staff personnel as money and staff time permits.

### ***D. Staffing Effects on Documentation***

Follow-up paperwork on missions and training are often incomplete because limited staffing does not permit time for recontacting volunteers or jurisdictions to gather additional information. Training documentation is not reviewed regularly because staff must deal with more current issues on a daily basis. Current staff is inadequate to review and maintain proper paperwork for the training and response of over 500 volunteer and jurisdictional responders and over 150 incidents a year and keep up with current issues on a day-to-day basis. Pursuit of documentation must often be abandoned before follow up to deal with more currently pressing issues, such as coordination of response. Staff currently has minimum time to review documentation procedures for correctness, completeness, or relevancy.

## **VIII. FUNDING ISSUES**

### ***A. Current Funding***

Currently, the SAR Program in VDES funds one full-time employee with a training budget of \$75,000 of state-appropriated money to be used to train both the volunteers and local jurisdictions in SAR. This level of funding trains about 300 students a year; however, applications and requests for training exceed class capacity by 50-75 percent. Potential students often have to try two or more times before they can get into a needed class. Current funding pays for training facilities, instructors, training materials (including books), audio-visual aids and training aids. Due to the nature of the activity and need for safety involved, training aids like ropes, rescue hardware, maps, and first aid equipment need to be replaced and updated regularly. Currently, there is no regularly scheduled replacement due to funding constraints, but conventional wisdom and outside experts are suggesting equipment should be replaced every two to five years depending on wear. Training equipment gets harder use and should be replaced according to the low end of the replacement schedule to comply with safety concerns.

### ***B. Effects on Volunteers***

#### **1. Training**

Training is an ongoing process due to the nature of the volunteer organizations, including fluid membership. It is based on individual opportunity, time, and the desire of the volunteers to serve. Volunteers must be continually recruited by the individual groups and this creates a need for continual training.

The program needs to train approximately 300 volunteers a year in the basics of SAR to keep up with entry level positions that are vacated each year. This does not increase the level of basic personnel but maintains a status quo. This does not include the personnel who need or desire to be trained at the jurisdictional level. Limited funding has restricted class offering and size. This has affected the training of groups and jurisdictional personnel by limiting the number of individuals from each group that can be trained in a year. In some instances, this has directly affected volunteer teams and their ability to sign MOUs with VDES and VDES use of their resources for response in the field. The lack of training and MOUs has left areas of the state lacking in timely response to search emergencies.

Equivalent training is conducted by outside organizations and is recognized by VDES if it meets the State imposed standards. However, outside training has proved to be too costly (over \$200 a student not including room and board) and too infrequent to help most volunteer providers. For local law enforcement, local jurisdiction emergency services workers, and state agency personnel, the VDES program is the only viable source of training. State personnel have come to rely upon this training. Limits in funding have caused VDES to have to choose between training either the volunteer responders or state resources

involved in SAR, such as Forestry, Conservation and Recreation, and Game and Inland Fisheries.

## **2. Administration**

Limits in funding for administration of SAR activities, have kept program growth small. Planning for the activity is kept intentionally small because of funding, and does not meet the needs or expectations of the users. Demand for training continues to increase; however, the training calendar is kept at the same level each year because limited staffing makes it difficult to administer the current program, much less expand its offerings. Assistance to jurisdictions and promotion of the program is kept to a minimum due to insufficient funding and staffing support.

### ***C. Effects on Search Outcomes***

Funding has affected searches because volunteer responders and volunteer search groups must always pay their own expenses when responding to a search. This includes gas, oil, and wear and tear on their vehicles, all equipment used in SAR and its maintenance, and personal expenses (including time off from work.) How much responders are able to spend at any given time and under certain circumstances for SAR directly affects the state and local jurisdictions' ability to obtain trained and effective resources.

## **IX. PROPOSED RECOMMENDATIONS**

### **A. Staffing Needs**

Currently, staffing is the weak link in this activity. The program has become static due to lack of attention to records, training updates, and program development in general. Based on the demand and need from the volunteers, jurisdictions, and state agencies, there is a clear need for additional staffing in training and administration to support this activity.

All program initiatives and work should still come under one program director to ensure continuity of the program. However, because the training program is becoming so large, there should be additional staff to coordinate the training aspects of the program. Duties would include:

- Assisting Program Coordinator in development of training calendar.
- Overall coordination of all training events sponsored by the state.
- Coordination with jurisdictions and volunteers on individual training events.
- Training, administration supply, and inventory upkeep.
- Upkeep, management and replacement of training aids.
- Instructor coordination.

Documentation and recordkeeping for the SAR activity should continue to be augmented with the addition of a part-time employee up to 1,500 hours a year. This employee would be responsible for the following:

- The update of the Training Management System (TMS) for documenting training and generating reports pertaining to SAR training as needed and requested.
- General reports for inside and outside the agency.
- Upkeep of agency records for training and response.
- Answering routine correspondence and telephone questions and inquiries from volunteers, jurisdictions, state agencies, and the public.
- Maintenance of agency SAR files.
- Assisting Program Coordinator and Training Officer with administrative duties.

Increased staffing will allow the coordinator to focus on and devote energy to program development and need without having to worry about the day-to-day

activities of the program. More time will be devoted to ensuring that sensitive search issues are handled properly and that the program promotes and achieves a quality product for the volunteers, jurisdictions, and citizens of the Commonwealth.

### **Recommendation**

**It is recommended that this program be allocated an additional position of one full-time employee to serve as training officer to work under the Program Coordinator. It is also recommended to keep the part-time Program Support Technician to support this program, also under the supervision of the Program Coordinator.**

### ***B. Funding Needs***

Funding, other than salaries, for this activity should be divided into three categories: training, operational response, and administration. Training money has increased minimally over the past ten years, but not enough to keep up with program growth. Operational response money has never been allocated to the program. Administrative funding for the program has also not kept up with program growth.

#### **1. SAR Training Program**

Currently, training enough volunteers has become difficult due to the amount of jurisdictional and state personnel requesting training versus available staff and instructors. Current applications for upcoming classes, originally designed for the volunteer responders, are 50 percent paid personnel from the jurisdictions and state agencies. Paid personnel could be excluded from training, but they rely on it to accomplish their work objectives. Many are required to attend some sort of SAR training and this is the only training offered in the state. Volunteers, state and jurisdictional responders now compete for the same slots. Volunteer response suffers because the program is not able to train enough volunteers to account for promotion and turn over while responding to the required training of the jurisdictional and state responders

Training jurisdictional responders away from the volunteers opens up slots for more volunteers to be trained together. However, funding limitations keep this training to a maximum of four times a year. With potentially 140 jurisdictions to serve, this does not meet the need.

### **Recommendation**

**It is recommended that training allocations for this program be increased to \$100,000 annually. This money will be used in a scheduled update of training materials, training of volunteers, and increasing the number of courses that can be offered to jurisdictional and state personnel without taking training away from the volunteers.**

## **2. Volunteer Operational Response**

SAR volunteers have traditionally absorbed the entire cost of response. Unlike volunteers for EMS or fire departments where equipment, uniforms, and vehicles are provided, SAR responders must absorb the entire burden and cost of response. This, at times, has limited the response of trained resources solely due to the volunteer's current financial situation. Response would be enhanced by the addition of an operational response budget to reimburse SAR volunteers for:

- Mileage, gas, and oil used by the SAR responder in their private vehicle when responding to a SAR incident authorized by a state mission number.
- Use of expendable equipment during a SAR incident authorized by a state mission number.
- Equipment lost or damaged due to use during a search and rescue incident authorized by state mission number.

### **Recommendation**

**It is recommended that \$25,000 annually be allocated to the SAR response activity to reimburse volunteers for the above out-of-pocket expenses. This money to be administered and claims reviewed by the SAR Program Coordinator.**

## **3. Administration**

SAR resources are geographically spread across the Commonwealth. Due to lack of administrative funding, there is currently no scheduled way to verify that resources continue to meet qualifications for state MOU. Visitation, scheduled and unscheduled, remains the most effective way of checking on the continued viability of the resources.

### **Recommendation**

**It is recommended that a budget of \$15,000 annually be allocated to the SAR Program to be used by the SAR Program Coordinator and staff to make scheduled and unscheduled visits to volunteer SAR groups across the state to assess their readiness for SAR response. This money may also be spent by the staff to assist local jurisdictions in setting up SAR programs in their area.**

Appendix A

**HOUSE JOINT RESOLUTION NO. 185**

*Requesting the Secretary of Public Safety to study the search and rescue efforts in the Commonwealth and determine the appropriate level of state funding therefor.*

Agreed to by the House of Delegates, February 17, 1998

Agreed to by the Senate, March 10, 1998

WHEREAS, search and rescue incidents are complex events requiring quick response and extensive training; and

WHEREAS, on average, more fatalities occur each year from search incidents in the Commonwealth than the combined totals from all natural disasters and hazardous material incidents; and

WHEREAS, state search and rescue (SAR) volunteers have already contributed over 57,000 man-hours and traveled over 167,000 miles during search and rescue incidents, representing a savings of over \$900,000 to the Commonwealth and local governments; and

WHEREAS, state volunteer SAR teams do not have adequate funding to purchase equipment and address basic operating costs; and

WHEREAS, the Department of Emergency Services lacks a direct legislative mandate to conduct search and rescue activities; and

WHEREAS, increasing state support to improve SAR training opportunities, update current courses, and provide additional administrative support requires careful consideration of a variety of complex fiscal and policy issues; now, therefore, be it

**RESOLVED** by the House of Delegates, the Senate concurring, That the Secretary of Public Safety be requested to study the search and rescue efforts in the Commonwealth and determine the appropriate level of state funding therefor. In conducting the study, the Secretary shall seek the input and expertise of the Department of Emergency Services, local law enforcement, fire and rescue personnel, and SAR volunteers.

All agencies of the Commonwealth shall provide assistance to the Secretary for this study, upon request.

The Secretary shall complete his work in time to submit his findings and recommendations to the Governor and the 1999 Session of the General Assembly as provided in the procedures of the Division of Legislative Automated Systems for the processing of legislative documents.



Search and Rescue Survey from Jurisdictions
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Of the 140 jurisdictions in the Commonwealth 68 responded to the survey by the cut off date. Responding jurisdictions were representative of a geographic cross section of the state.

- Jurisdictions responding reported 149 searches within the past year. (54 searches were reported to VDES for the entire state during the same time period.)
- Jurisdictions responding reported using outside resources in 72 of those searches.
- Of the jurisdictions responding, 66 knew that they could request additional resources from VDES; 2 did not.
- Of those responding jurisdictions; 34 had called VDES to request additional resources for a search incident during the last year, 33 had not, and one responded not applicable.
- 33 jurisdictions said the resources had been useful to them during a search, 4 said they had not, and 31 responded not applicable. \*
- Of the responding jurisdictions, 51 have requested resources outside of VDES, 13 have not, 4 responded not applicable.\*
- 51 jurisdictions answered yes when asked if they had personnel trained for SAR within their jurisdictions; 17 responded no. (This survey did not ask jurisdictions to specify to what level of training their employees were trained or where they received their training.)
- 36 responding jurisdictions had either sponsored or sent personnel to VDES-conducted SAR training, 32 had not.
- 60 of the jurisdictions indicated they were familiar with the types of training that the VDES SAR program offers; 8 indicated they were not familiar.
- 36 jurisdictions advised that supervisor found this training useful for employees, 1 responded no, and 31 responded not applicable or did not know.\*

\* In most cases where jurisdictions had a not applicable response, those jurisdictions had not had a search in the past year or had never sent personnel to any type of training.

Appendix B

Jurisdictions responding to the Survey:

	<u>Counties</u>		<u>Cities</u>	
Accomack	Greene	Prince William	Alexandria	Richmond
Amherst	Halifax	Pulaski	Bristol	Roanoke
Arlington	Isle of Wight	Rappahannock	Buena Vista	Salem
Bath	James City	Richmond	Chesapeake	Staunton
Bedford	Lousia	Roanoke	Fairfax	Suffolk
Botetourt	Loudoun	Rockbridge	Falls Church	Williamsburg
Campbell	Madison	Rockingham	Franklin	
Chesterfield	Montgomery	Shenandoah	Fredericksburg	<u>Towns</u>
Craig	New Kent	Spotsylvania	Galax	Chincoteague
Dickenson	Orange	Stafford	Hampton	Christiansburg
Fairfax	Patrick	Surry	Hopewell	Farmville
Fauquier	Powhatan		Manassas Park	Vinton
Fluvanna	Prince Edward			Martinsville
Franklin	Prince George			Portsmouth

(Three surveys from unidentified sources)



