



Enhancing Volunteer Services: Developing Operational and Engagement Strategies for Search and Rescue Alberta

Public Report

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Introduction

Search and Rescue Alberta is a not-for-profit volunteer association that assists search and rescue teams in their efforts to provide a superior and dedicated level of service to the people of Alberta. Search and Rescue in Alberta was established in the early 1990s as a grassroots response to look for lost individuals in wilderness settings. To date, Search and Rescue Alberta comprises 38 search and rescue teams with a variety of uniquely developed specialties (e.g., ground search and rescue, evidence search, water search and rescue, air search and rescue, high angle or angle search and rescue). The groups are located in 6 administrative regions across the province. Commissioned by local tasking agencies, including law enforcement, fire rescue, and emergency medical services, Search and Rescue teams assist with search and rescue incidents for lost or injured persons as well as provide support in natural or man-made disasters, as well as states of emergency. Due to the rapid expansion of teams in Alberta to include approximately 1,500 volunteer members, many of the early operating and administrative procedures and engagement strategies were not standardized. In addition, the rapid growth and expansion of services did not allow for uniform and broadly understood practices and leadership to be developed.

To improve efficiencies and support modernizing the operations of search and rescue teams in Alberta, Search and Rescue Alberta partnered with NorQuest College and the Office of the Fire Commissioner, Alberta Municipal Affairs.¹ The resulting community-based project's goals were two-fold:

1. Document search and rescue's current state in order to fill a gap in knowledge facing Search and Rescue Alberta, specifically regarding overall performance of teams and opportunities for improvement of Search and Rescue operations province-wide;
2. Provide recommendations to improve Search and Rescue volunteer capacity, safety, training, operations, and community engagement.

Additionally, the project sought to understand what worked well when a Search and Rescue team was called out for a search, a rescue, or to assist with incident management? What did not work well? What changes are needed to make the delivery of Search and Rescue services effective from the Search and Rescue teams' and local tasking agencies' perspectives? And to provide key statistics related to the activities of Search and Rescue teams and the level of their engagement with tasking agencies.

Between March 2019 and July 2020, the project team conducted 25 focus groups with 165 Search and Rescue volunteers, 16 interviews with tasking agency representative and 2 members of Search and Rescue Alberta Executive, and analyzed data from the D4H Database, an administrative database used by Search and Rescue teams to track incidents, training, and team members' certifications. The project was reviewed and received approval from NorQuest College's Research Ethics Board.

Key Findings

¹ At the time that the project was developed, Search and Rescue Alberta was under the jurisdiction of the Office of the Fire Commissioner.

Search and Rescue Teams & their Work with Tasking Agencies

Membership & Qualifications

The analysis of the D4H database revealed that a total of 3,756 volunteers have been members of the Search & Rescue Association of Alberta since 1990. As of June 2020, 40% remain active and 60% have retired. The average duration in a team, across all teams, for members who have retired is 5.4 years. Search and Rescue Alberta members' average tenure was 7 years. About three out of every four (73%) active Search and Rescue team members are operational. The top 5 roles performed by operational members include: searcher or tracker (23%), regular member or member in training (22%), cave rescue (20%), board member or staff (14%), and search manager (10%). Regarding minimum requirements for ground search and rescue, almost half (46%) of all Search and Rescue Alberta members have valid ICS 100 training, a similar percentage of members (43%) have a Basic Search and Rescue Skills certification, and one out of every four members (25%) has Standard First Aid/CPR certification. Only 2% of the 1502 members with D4H records are identified as a trainer or instructors, and 1% of the members hold RCMP or Search and Rescue liaison positions.

Search and Rescue Teams' Activities

Out of a total of 32,567 activities attended by active Search and Rescue members between May 1999 to July 2020, about half (54%) were exercises, more than one third (40%) were events, and less than one in ten (6%) were incidents. The busiest season for assisting tasking agencies with incidents is from April to October (77%) each year. Out of 1,669 incidents recorded in the D4H database detailing the reason for the original tasking, about half (49%) were attempts to locate. Other common reasons for tasking include beacon (13%), civil emergency (10%), disaster (7%), evidence (6%), and evidence search (6%). Regarding the primary type of incident since 1990, most (88%) were ground incidents, a few were water incidents (10%), and a very small percentage (2%) were air incidents.

Tasking Agency Relationships

Out of 730 incidents, events, and exercises that included information about the participating tasking agency, forty percent (40%) involved Police Services, thirty-six percent (36%) involved the RCMP, twenty percent (20%) included municipal Fire Rescue Services, and four percent (4%) involved Alberta Health Services. The D4H records demonstrate that Search and Rescue teams across the province significantly differ in how close they work with tasking agencies. Over half of the teams (51%) appear to have close working relationships with the RCMP and approximately one third (36%) with municipal police services (36%), while others highlight their collaboration with their local fire rescue services (13%).

Search and Rescue Alberta Current Strengths

Search and Rescue Volunteers' Commitment & Community Engagement

Entirely dedicated to saving lives, Search and Rescue volunteers are available 24 hours a day, 365 days a year. There is a significant commitment of time and efforts required from Search and Rescue volunteers to perform searches, take ongoing training, attend team meetings, and participate in recruiting and fundraising activities. An average Search and Rescue Alberta member is engaged in approximately 68 activities and spends about 376 hours attending events, exercises, or incidents during their tenure with Search and Rescue. These first-responders also attend community engagement events to promote awareness about Search and Rescue Alberta. Search and Rescue teams offer wilderness survival training for children and adults through AdventureSmart and Outdoor Trip Planner. Additionally, Search and Rescue volunteers regularly support and ensure public safety for local and provincial events such as Canada Day, Christmas Train, and the Stampede Parade.

Search and Rescue Professional Skills

Despite the civil nature of the Search and Rescue Alberta association, Search and Rescue volunteers are extensively trained in a variety of professional skills, including basic search and rescue techniques, search management, lost person behavior, first aid, communication, navigation, and wilderness survival. Achieving and maintaining core competencies in basic ground search and rescue is an essential requirement for Search and Rescue operational members. Operational team members are encouraged to become certified in specialized advanced skills depending on the individual's preferences and the need for those skills within the team's area of geographic coverage (e.g., rope rescue, ice rescue, mountain rescue, forest fire evacuations, etc.). Given the increasing numbers of natural disasters and states of emergency and Search and Rescue volunteers' willingness to be actively involved in all-hazards emergency response, Search and Rescue teams seek additional training.

The project data found that the level of recognition and acknowledgement of Search and Rescue teams' professional skills and operational capabilities is primarily determined by their relationships with tasking agencies. Search and Rescue teams with close relationships with local tasking agencies are more frequently involved with incident resolution to their full potential. Moreover, when tasking agencies engage the Search and Rescue teams throughout the entirety of the incident (i.e., from the initial call right through to the resolution and debrief), incident response is seen to go well and Search and Rescue team members reported they had a strong, collegial, equal relationship with the tasking agencies. Conversely, Search and Rescue teams who do not have good working relationships with tasking agencies were less likely to be engaged throughout the entire incident and reported feel treated similarly to other civilians and viewed as unprofessional and unqualified. Most concerning was they also felt they had little opportunity to meaningfully contribute to incidents' resolution.

Collaboration

Search and Rescue Alberta teams cover over 660,000 km² of vast and specific terrain. Large-scale and complicated incidents require more than one team to deliver search and rescue services. Volunteers reported that positive working relationships and collaboration across teams and with tasking agencies facilitated successful responses. Search and Rescue teams who work well within the region and with tasking agencies practice engagement activities, such as cross-training, sharing available courses, joint mock searches, and provincial/regional exercises to identify each other strengths and weaknesses and learn how to work as a cohesive team on a scene. The acknowledgement of specialized and advanced skills, proper and consistent use of emergency callout systems, and utilization of unique equipment (e.g., a command post, a jet boat, a stretcher carrier) by Search and Rescue teams and tasking agencies when working on the incident resolution are also considered as valuable contributors for delivering Search and Rescue services in a timely and effective manner.

Search and Rescue Alberta Current Gaps & Challenges

Retention & Recruitment

Participants expressed concern that Search and Rescue teams are highly homogeneous and aging, which is a potential risk to future membership. Recruitment and retention are identified as challenges by the majority of teams across the province. Since 1990 (when Search and Rescue Alberta was established) and June 2020, the D4H database shows an overall retention rate across all Alberta teams and regions of 40% with an average tenure of 5.4 years. Participants felt that a decrease in the number of callouts from tasking agencies and lack of involvement in a scene increase volunteer turnover. Between 2001 and 2020,

Search and Rescue Alberta leadership has a member retention of 31%, with the average tenure of 7 years. Despite this relatively long average length of service, focus group participants felt that the lack of continuity in Search and Rescue Alberta board members has resulted in contact information and relationships being lost, and documents being misplaced or never disseminated.

In addition to an aging and homogenous membership, many participants emphasized that their teams struggle to recruit new members. The significant time and financial commitments expected from a new member, as well as lack of public awareness about Search and Rescue Alberta, are perceived as barriers to recruiting young adults. According to the D4H activity tag, a large majority of activities conducted by Search and Rescue members relate to administration and only 14% are devoted to public relations and recruiting. One area for improvement could be increased public relations, advertising, and recruiting activities across all teams.

Standardization

A lack of province-wide standardization for training and administrative systems was identified as a barrier to the consistent delivering of high quality, competent, and safe search and rescue services. Inconsistency between competency-based standardized training negatively impacts communications and relationships across teams. It also negatively affects tasking agencies and increases potential health and safety risks when differently trained volunteers work side-by-side in a search or rescue setting. Search and Rescue members from one group cannot expect the same level of skills, knowledge, and abilities from another team's members and, as a result, immediately trust the ability for inter-team operations. Similarly, tasking agencies are not immediately confident in Search and Rescue teams' level of preparedness for operations and can consider them as "second thoughts" for callouts and deployment due to lack of standardized preparation. Province-wide standardized training would ensure that Search and Rescue groups work together in the same capacity and clarify the Search and Rescue volunteers' capabilities to tasking agencies, potentially developing formalized and increasing trustful relationships among all partners such that Search and Rescue teams are tasked regularly and engaged as equal partners.

Participants reported administrative overload associated with volunteering and managing a search and rescue team. Besides providing search and rescue operations, Search and Rescue team members have to deal with developing a variety of policies and procedures and administration (e.g., grant applications, finance forms and reports, contracts, tracking information in the D4H database) that demand a significant time commitment and professional skills. Individual volunteers perceive themselves as professionals in search and rescue services, but unprofessional and even non-proficient as administrators. Province-wide standardized administrative policies, procedures, and processes would alleviate pressure on Search and Rescue team members and save volunteer hours for additional training required to fulfil new response in emergencies and disasters. This, in turn, would improve the overall Search and Rescue teams' performance on a scene.

Relationship Management

Many focus group participants talked about the lack of a long-lasting working relationship between their teams and tasking agencies which results in decreased call-outs. Uncertainty about Search and Rescue Alberta's role and Search and Rescue teams' capabilities, low level of engagement in joint activities, lack of willingness to utilize volunteers to full advantage due to their civil nature from tasking agencies' side, and lack of skills and knowledge in developing consistent working relationships from Search and Rescue teams' side were identified as the main challenges of relationship management. Some participants also called

attention to tasking agency staff turnover, dependence on personal rather than formal/official relationships, and a lack of Search and Rescue liaisons as barriers to consistency in tasking agency relationships. Both the focus group discussions' and the D4H data analyses show that Search and Rescue volunteers spend more time attending events and training exercises than assisting with incidents. Participants also expressed concern about a quick deterioration of volunteers' skills, qualifications, and abilities if they are not activated regularly. Search and Rescue teams would like Search and Rescue Alberta to play a larger role in supporting them with developing effective tasking agency engagement strategies.

Funding

A lack of consistent and sustainable funding was one of the most pervasive challenges identified by all Search and Rescue teams interviewed for the project. Even Search and Rescue teams with significant financial support from their counties and/or fire departments noted that Search and Rescue services should be recognized and receive stable, predictable funding from the provincial government. Search and rescue teams may apply for limited training grants from the Government of Alberta; however, the level of funding available is insufficient to support highly-trained professionals with the training and equipment needed to be ready and available to deploy at the moment's call-out. To off-set this lack of provincial support, Search and Rescue groups rely heavily on community fundraising, donations, corporate and municipality funding, and volunteers' financial contributions. These monetary resources are inconsistent across teams, however, and often go with usage restrictions. Some participants pointed out that insufficient funding makes it impossible to offer paid board positions for Search and Rescue Alberta that are essential in competently addressing administrative workloads and lessening the administrative burden for all Search and Rescue teams. Participants advocated for increased government funding to the level that is needed for Search and Rescue teams to operate safely and substantially.

Conclusion

The project data analysis reveals that search and rescue services in Alberta, while consisting of highly-trained volunteers who provide quality ground search and rescue services and civil emergency response, are not operating or being utilized to their full potential. While most project participants were proud of their teams' strengths, such as basic search and rescue skills and uniquely developed specialties, the collaborative relationships they have developed with other teams, and their community engagement, many were concerned that Search and Rescue volunteers are always not activated when needed and are not recognized as valuable resources in states of emergency. Tasking agencies, in turn, do not have a clear understanding of Search and Rescue teams' skills, qualifications, and abilities and what they can bring to a scene. One potential area of improvement is to clearly define Search and Rescue Alberta's role and Search and Rescue teams' capabilities to local and provincial tasking agencies such that volunteers' advanced and specialized skills are utilized regularly and to full advantage.

The project findings also demonstrate that the diversity of the Search and Rescue Alberta teams in terms of the core competencies training, qualifications, membership recruiting and retention, tasking agency relationships, and administrative processes is considerably wide and varied. This suggests challenges facing teams on any given issue is likely contextual in nature rather than due to the current structure of Search and Rescue Alberta and province-wide Search and Rescue operations. The variance also suggests there are best practices employed by highly successful which can be replicated among the teams who are currently facing difficulties. As such, all Search and Rescue teams will benefit from province-wide standardization of training, operations, and processes.

Recommendations

While the project data analysis reveals that Search and Rescue Alberta's state of affairs is overall good, there are still areas of improvement regarding membership engagement and retention, standardized training, relationships with tasking agencies, and fund development. Implementation of proposed recommendations would improve Search and Rescue volunteer capacity, safety, training, community engagement, and overall performance on a scene. Recommendations to Search and Rescue Alberta fall into 4 key areas, identified below.

Membership Engagement, Retention, and Recruiting

- Promote communication and the sharing of best practices between teams specifically regarding: member recruitment and retention; training; relationships with tasking agencies and community; advertising and community connection; and, effective administrative processes.
- Assist with relationships between tasking agencies and Search and Rescue teams, between teams within a region or across the province, and between teams and their local communities.
- Consider creating paid positions for Search and Rescue Alberta board members and/or administrative assistants to reduce the administrative burden and allow Search and Rescue team members to focus on training and incidents.
- Develop specific province-wide recruitment strategies to attract new members specifically for administrative, IT, and liaison positions, not only for operational positions.

Standardized Training

- Create a standardized approach to the core competencies in ground search and rescue.
- Provide standard curriculum and the necessary training, in various formats (face to face, online, hybrid, synchronous, asynchronous) to meet basic requirements for civil emergency first responders.
- Ensure and require a standardized level of training, certification, and qualifications for all membership roles across all teams.
- Provide more province-wide exercises with standardized practices to ensure even performance between teams when assisting tasking agencies.
- Encourage members to pursue advanced and specialized Search and Rescue courses and training activities, and to become instructors and trainers.

Relationship with Tasking Agencies

- Work with tasking agencies to clearly define and outline the roles, responsibilities, operational processes, and communication channels between Search and Rescue teams and the local tasking agencies to facilitate relationships and improve incident operations.
- Expand relationships with tasking agencies beyond the RCMP, municipal police services, and fire and rescue services to other local organizations.
- Provide a liaison to local and provincial tasking agencies to represent Search and Rescue interests.
- Support the development of formal relationships between teams and tasking agencies rather than having teams rely on personal relationships between specific members and agencies.
- Establish a contingency/transition plan in case of membership turnover to ensure relationship continuity with tasking agencies and other key stakeholders.

Fund Development

- Advocate for sustainable funding for Search and Rescue Alberta and Search and Rescue teams for essential training and operational costs, administrative paid positions, equipment, and facilities maintenance.