Senate Bill 21-245 Overview

This bill develops a definition for backcountry search and rescue (BSAR) in statute, and requires the implementation of a study and stakeholder process to address numerous issues with the existing volunteer-based BSAR program and provide policy recommendations. The bill will also address immediate needs for BSAR organizations by creating a pilot program to provide mental health services to BSAR responders.

Background

As the state’s population increases at an unprecedented rate, Colorado’s BSAR system faces new and demanding challenges. A Colorado Parks and Wildlife study showed that 92% of Coloradans recreate outdoors, and 62% recreate in parks, trails, and open spaces one or more times a week. On average, Colorado BSAR organizations respond to 3,600 search and rescue incidents—more than any other state. Currently, BSAR efforts are a local issue, with county sheriffs required to coordinate BSAR efforts within their counties. The only state funding support for this important work is $350k in annual grants from the Department of Local Affairs’ SAR fund. The majority of these funds are raised from a 25-cent surcharge on hunting and fishing licenses and motorboat, snowmobile and OHV registrations. Additional funding is provided by the sale of Colorado Outdoor Recreation Search and Rescue (COSAR) cards.

At this point, roughly 2,800 unpaid BSAR responders, who serve on almost 50 non-profit BSAR teams give over 500,000 person hours annually for training and responding to BSAR incidents. No Colorado BSAR team charges for its service, so most depend on grants and donations, often from the BSAR Volunteers themselves. In addition, BSAR is often dangerous, and volunteers receive no compensation, healthcare, or mental health services for the work they provide the state. This is despite the distinct possibility of personal injury, and the clear impacts to mental health from witnessing extreme trauma or death.

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The report required by SB21-245 will address the following issues:

1. How to improve coordination among County Sheriffs and local law enforcement agencies, public, or non-profit organizations that provide backcountry search and rescue organizations.

2. Evaluate the availability and adequacy of workers’ compensation or other benefits for individuals who are injured in the course of providing backcountry search and rescue services.

3. Examine the availability and adequacy of retirement benefits for BSAR volunteers.

4. Examine the compensation and reimbursement of expenses for BSAR volunteers.

5. Evaluate the availability of necessary equipment and the need for funding to obtain, maintain and replace equipment.

6. Examine and explore the physical and psychological impacts of providing BSAR services and the availability of physical and psychological support for these volunteers.

7. Explore the issues related to governmental immunity for BSAR volunteers.

8. Explore the training needs for BSAR volunteers.

9. Examine the need for public outdoor safety education.

Colorado Parks and Wildlife will conduct outreach and training on the physical and psychological effects of search and rescue endeavors on BSAR volunteers. This pilot program will allow for qualified consultants to conduct training to recognize and address the physical and psychological needs of BSAR volunteers, create outreach materials and develop a grant program to fund these efforts around the state.