
Standard Operating Procedures (SOPs)

Volunteer Search and Rescue Unit

Effective Date: 2/22/2025

Purpose: To establish consistent, safe, and effective procedures for responding to search and rescue incidents.

1. Activation and Mobilization

Objective: Ensure rapid and organized deployment of the SAR unit upon receiving a request for assistance.

Procedure:

1. Incident Notification

- The SAR unit is activated via an official request from law enforcement, emergency services, or a designated coordinator.
- Notification is received through the unit's primary communication channel (e.g., phone, radio, text alert system).

2. Initial Assessment

- The SAR Coordinator or Team Leader acknowledges the request and gathers initial details:
 - Nature of the incident (e.g., missing hiker, lost child, natural disaster).
 - Location and terrain (e.g., coordinates, urban/rural, weather conditions).
 - Number of missing people and last known position (LKP).
 - Timeframe of disappearance.
- Verify the request's legitimacy with the requesting authority if unclear.

3. Team Mobilization

- The Team Leader assigns available volunteers based on skills, proximity, and availability.
- Volunteers confirm participation within 15 minutes of notification.
- Minimum team size: 2 members unless otherwise specified.
- Volunteers assemble at a designated staging area within 1 hour of activation (or as directed).

4. Equipment Check

- Each volunteer ensures they have:
 - Personal gear (e.g., appropriate clothing, flashlight, water, food).
 - SAR kit (e.g., map, compass/GPS, first aid supplies, communication device).
 - Team gear (e.g., ropes, stretchers) as assigned by the Team Leader.
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2. Response to Search Incidents

Objective: Locate and assist missing persons efficiently while maintaining volunteer safety.

Procedure:

1. Briefing

- At the staging area, the Team Leader conducts a briefing:
 - Share incident details, maps, and search boundaries.
 - Assign roles (e.g., searchers, communicator, scribe).
 - Establish a timeline and check-in intervals (e.g., every 30 minutes via radio).

2. Search Execution

- Deploy in assigned patterns (e.g., grid, line, or sector search) based on terrain and incident details.
- Maintain visual or auditory contact with team members unless otherwise instructed.
- Mark searched areas with flagging, GPS waypoints, or other agreed-upon methods.
- Report clues (e.g., footprints, clothing) immediately to the Team Leader without disturbing evidence.

3. Safety Protocols

- Volunteers must:
 - Stay within assigned areas and avoid freelancing.
 - Monitor weather and personal fatigue; report hazards (e.g., cliffs, water) immediately.
 - Use the “buddy system” unless approved otherwise by the Team Leader.
- Cease operations if conditions become unsafe (e.g., lightning, flooding) and retreat to the staging area.

4. Subject Located

- If the missing person is found:
 - Announce via radio: “Subject located at [coordinates/time].”
 - Assess the person’s condition (e.g., conscious, injured) and provide first aid as needed.
 - Notify the Team Leader and await instructions for extraction or additional support.
 - If deceased, secure the area, avoid disturbing the scene, and await law enforcement.
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3. Response to Rescue Incidents

Objective: Safely extract and stabilize individuals in distress.

Procedure:

1. Approach and Assessment

- Approach cautiously, assessing environmental hazards (e.g., unstable ground, water currents).
- Establish communication with the subject if possible (e.g., verbal, hand signals).
- Evaluate injuries or immediate needs (e.g., hypothermia, dehydration).

2. Rescue Operations

- Deploy necessary equipment (e.g., ropes, harnesses, stretchers) under the Team Leader’s direction.
- Use trained personnel for technical rescues (e.g., high-angle, swift water); untrained volunteers assist only as directed.
- Stabilize the subject before moving unless immediate danger exists (e.g., fire, rising water, certain environmental emergencies).

3. Extraction

- Move the subject to a safe location or handover point for emergency services.
 - Maintain constant communication with the team and external agencies (e.g., EMS, police).
 - Document the subject’s condition and actions taken for handover.
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4. Communication Protocols

Objective: Ensure clear and reliable communication during operations.

Procedure:**1. Primary Communication**

- Use designated radios or phones with assigned channels/frequencies.
- Test devices before deployment.

2. Check-Ins

- Teams report status to the Team Leader at pre-set intervals (e.g., every 60 minutes).
- Use concise updates: "Team 1, all clear, coordinates X/Y, 1300 hours."

3. Emergency Signals

- Verbal: "Mayday" or "Emergency" repeated three times.
 - Visual: Three whistle blasts, flashlight pulses, or arm waves.
 - Immediately report emergencies to the Team Leader and follow their instructions.
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5. Debriefing and Stand-Down

Objective: Conclude operations effectively and improve future responses.

Procedure:**1. Operation Conclusion**

- The Team Leader declares the mission complete when:
 - The subject is found and handed over.
 - Authorities have called off the search.
 - Safety or resource limits are reached.
- All teams return to the staging area.

2. Debriefing

- Conduct a group debrief within 24 hours:
 - Discuss what worked well and challenges encountered.
 - Collect logs, notes, and observations from volunteers.
- Address emotional well-being; offer support resources if needed.

3. Equipment and Reporting

- Inspect and restock gear, report damage or losses.

- The duty officer submits a written report to the SAR Coordinator within 48 hours, including:
 - Timeline, actions taken, and outcomes.
 - GPS tracklogs if applicable.
 - Recommendations for future operations.
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6. General Guidelines

- **Safety First:** Volunteers' safety takes priority over all else. No unnecessary risks are to be taken.
 - **Training Compliance:** Only perform tasks for which you are trained and certified.
 - **Coordination:** Operate under the direction of the Team Leader and in collaboration with external agencies.
 - **Confidentiality:** Do not share incident details publicly unless authorized.
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