
A BILL FOR AN ACT

RELATING TO SEARCH AND RESCUE.

BE IT ENACTED BY THE LEGISLATURE OF THE STATE OF HAWAII:

1 SECTION 1. The legislature finds that Hawaii is among the
2 states with the highest per capita rates of missing persons,
3 including both residents and visitors, magnifying the need for
4 improved oversight and accountability for search and rescue
5 activities.

6 The legislature further finds that Hawaii's geographic
7 isolation, terrain, and tourism profile create a level of search
8 and rescue demand and risk that cannot be safely or efficiently
9 managed under the State's current fragmented system. In the
10 absence of centralized leadership, Hawaii has no statewide
11 mechanism to analyze the incidence and prevalence of missing
12 persons and search and rescue efforts, capture lessons learned,
13 or systematically implement prevention and mitigation
14 strategies.

15 The legislature finds that the State's geography, including
16 approximately seven hundred fifty miles of coastline and
17 3,800,000 acres of undeveloped property, coupled with steep



1 volcanic terrain, rapidly changing weather, and remote ocean and
2 inland areas, pose significant and increasing challenges for
3 search and rescue operations. Many residents and visitors hike,
4 hunt, and engage in ocean recreation, aviation, and other
5 high-risk activities in remote locations, where a delayed or
6 uncoordinated response can quickly turn a survivable incident
7 into a fatality.

8 The legislature further finds that current search and
9 rescue efforts are fragmented across more than a dozen federal,
10 state, county, and volunteer agencies and jurisdictions,
11 operating largely in a reactive posture, with no single entity
12 responsible for statewide strategy, standards, or
13 accountability. This decentralized model lacks standardized
14 protocols, unified training requirements, and a single point of
15 contact to provide daily centralized oversight and
16 administrative accountability for interagency communication and
17 mission-critical coordination for urban, maritime, and
18 wilderness search and rescue operations, as well as missing
19 person investigations. As a result, operations are often slowed
20 by jurisdictional confusion, duplicative responses, gaps in



1 coverage, and the inconsistent use of modern technology and best
2 practices.

3 The legislature notes that data and recent incidents have
4 shown that this inefficient decentralized model leads to delayed
5 emergency response times. Delayed responses endanger public
6 safety, put first responders at unnecessary higher risk, and
7 burden the State's economy. These delays and inefficiencies
8 increase the likelihood of extended searches, prolonged closures
9 of public lands and ocean areas, damage to sensitive natural and
10 cultural resources, and costly litigation and claims that could
11 be mitigated by a more coordinated, preventive approach.

12 The legislature recognizes that Hawaii's approximately
13 \$20,000,000,000 annual visitor economy, which generates roughly
14 \$2,400,000,000 in state tax revenue each year, depends on
15 maintaining the State's reputation as a safe destination.
16 Hawaii's visitors are among the most valuable in the nation,
17 leading major United States destinations in tax revenue per
18 visitor. One high-profile search and rescue tragedy or a
19 pattern of preventable fatalities could cause reputational
20 damage that would undermine this economic base. Visitor



1 arrivals and tax collections could be adversely affected and
2 impact the long-term cost of recovery for the State.

3 The legislature further notes that when placed against
4 national benchmarks, the State sits as a dangerous outlier for
5 inland search and rescue operations. While Hawaii currently
6 invests an annual statewide aggregate of approximately
7 \$43,000,000 in ocean safety, the State remains the only major
8 destination with a lack of dedicated state inland search and
9 rescue coordination. This creates a critical safety "gap" in
10 the State's public safety infrastructure. Ocean safety is
11 treated as a core state obligation while inland and
12 multi-jurisdictional search and rescue operations are left to a
13 patchwork of agencies, with no statewide strategy, oversight, or
14 data-driven planning.

15 The legislature finds that other states with large tourism
16 sectors and complex geography, such as California, Florida, and
17 New York, use state-level coordination as a baseline
18 requirement. California leverages its governor's office of
19 emergency services to ensure a unified response across diverse
20 urban, rural, and wilderness environments. New York, a critical
21 comparison point because it manages high-volume international



1 tourism across dense urban centers and vast wilderness areas
2 like the Adirondacks, maintains state-level coordination and
3 invests significant tax revenue in safety branding, prevention,
4 and coordinated operations.

5 The legislature believes that the establishment of a state
6 search and rescue coordinator would directly address these
7 deficiencies by:

- 8 (1) Ensuring a centralized authority for search and rescue
9 operations;
- 10 (2) Establishing unified communication and collaboration
11 among all participating federal, state, and county
12 agencies and volunteer organizations;
- 13 (3) Setting standards for training, certification, and
14 readiness requirements; and
- 15 (4) Creating clear lines of accountability for planning,
16 operations, and expenditures.

17 A state search and rescue coordinator would oversee the
18 allocation and deployment of resources to reduce redundancy and
19 close coverage gaps, expand the use of modern technology and
20 data analytics, and lead public education campaigns targeted at



1 high-risk behaviors and locations, thereby reducing incident
2 frequency and severity.

3 Additionally, establishing a state search and rescue
4 coordinator would allow for more effective coordination with
5 Emergency Support Function 9 of the Federal Emergency Management
6 Agency National Response Framework, which provides federal
7 lifesaving assistance to area authorities during large-scale
8 incidents that require a unified search and rescue response.

9 By leveraging data to decrease incident frequency; reduce
10 the duration and cost of operations; and identify opportunities
11 for federal, insurance, and private reimbursements, this Act is
12 intended to move Hawaii toward a self-sustaining level of
13 operational efficiency and long-term cost avoidance. The
14 legislature believes this Act is a vital investment to protect
15 the health of Hawaii's aina, enhance the safety and resilience
16 of communities across all islands, and strengthen the long-term
17 trajectory of Hawaii's \$20,000,000,000 annual visitor economy.

18 Accordingly, the purpose of this Act is to create a single
19 point of contact with authority over, responsibility for, and
20 daily oversight of emergency life saving efforts across all
21 jurisdictions. Specifically, this Act establishes, on a pilot



basis within the office of the governor, the office of the state search and rescue coordinator to:

- (1) Optimize resource allocation;
- (2) Coordinate cost-sharing and reimbursement opportunities; and
- (3) Reduce the aggregate fiscal burden on the State caused by multiple departments and jurisdictions having redundant and prolonged emergency responses.

SECTION 2. The Hawaii Revised Statutes is amended by adding a new chapter to be appropriately designated and to read as follows:

"CHAPTER

SEARCH AND RESCUE

§ -1 Short title. This chapter may be cited as the Hawaii State Search and Rescue Coordinator Act.

§ -2 Definitions. As used in this chapter, unless the context otherwise requires:

"Coordinator" or "state search and rescue coordinator" means the individual appointed to oversee statewide search and rescue operations under this chapter.



1 "Office" means the office of the state search and rescue
2 coordinator.

3 "Participating agencies" means federal, state, county, and
4 volunteer organizations focusing on search and rescue
5 operations, as identified by the coordinator.

6 "Rescue" means gaining access, rendering appropriate care,
7 and transporting any person by whatever means to a safe
8 environment for appropriate care.

9 "Search" means the process of looking for any person whose
10 location is not precisely known, and who may be in distress.

11 "Search and rescue" means the process of looking for all
12 persons at elevated risk of becoming lost or missing due to
13 exigent circumstances, including any overdue person who may be
14 in distress, and rendering care with the use of appropriately
15 trained and adequately equipped personnel.

16 "Search and rescue operation" includes, but is not limited
17 to, searching for any missing or lost person, cave rescue, high
18 angle or rough terrain rescue, urban search and rescue, dive
19 rescue and recovery of drowning victims, inland water search,
20 rescue, and recovery. "Search and rescue operation" may also
21 include any operation permitted pursuant to this chapter.



1 "Search and rescue vehicles and equipment" means any
2 motorized vehicle and equipment used in any search and rescue
3 operation.

4 § -3 Office of the state search and rescue coordinator;
5 established. There is established the office of the state
6 search and rescue coordinator within the office of the governor.
7 The office shall be headed by the state search and rescue
8 coordinator.

9 § -4 Powers and duties generally. The coordinator
10 shall:

- 11 (1) Review and assess the search and rescue readiness of
12 the State;
- 13 (2) Coordinate search and rescue efforts among local
14 agencies for the State and counties, including the
15 department of defense, county police departments,
16 county fire departments, Hawaii emergency management
17 agency, department of land and natural resources,
18 United States Coast Guard, and volunteers and
19 applicable county and federal services;
- 20 (3) Identify, inventory, and coordinate resources
21 available for searches and rescues;



- 1 (4) Adopt rules pursuant to chapter 91 necessary for the
2 purposes of this chapter, including rules to ensure
3 operations that organizations specializing in search
4 and rescue operations are certified at the appropriate
5 level;
- 6 (5) Prepare a plan for searches and rescues;
- 7 (6) Investigate and apply for grants and other financial
8 assistance for searches and rescues;
- 9 (7) Prepare and distribute publications relating to
10 searches and rescues;
- 11 (8) Maintain records of all search and rescue operations
12 in the State;
- 13 (9) Coordinate training in techniques of search and rescue
14 operations;
- 15 (10) Maintain and update every six months an interagency
16 emergency response roster of certified personnel
17 responding to incidents; and
- 18 (11) Appoint staff as may be necessary, subject to
19 chapters 76 and 89.

20 § -5 **Discretionary powers.** The office may:



- 1 (1) Establish headquarters and county offices at places
2 the office of the governor considers advisable for the
3 protection of the State;
- 4 (2) Operate or designate the use of search and rescue
5 vehicles and equipment during search and rescue
6 operations;
- 7 (3) Use land and buildings for the accommodation of office
8 employees and office vehicles and equipment;
- 9 (4) Contract or otherwise cooperate with any person or
10 public agency for the procurement of necessary
11 services or property, subject to chapter 103D where
12 applicable, including by entering into lease
13 agreements and taking title to real property as
14 necessary for the performance of the duties of the
15 office;
- 16 (5) As an emergency services agency, control and regulate
17 the acquisition, operation, use, maintenance, and
18 disposal of search and rescue vehicles and equipment;
- 19 (6) Accept and transfer grants, donations, and funds from
20 any source, including services and property, to carry



1 out search and rescue operations and the duties of the
2 office;

3 (7) Provide training, or enter into contracts to provide
4 training services in search and rescue techniques to
5 participating agencies, and other training deemed
6 necessary to execute duties effectively and
7 efficiently; and

8 (8) Perform any other duties necessary to discharge its
9 duties under this chapter.

10 **§ -6 Preparation of statistical reports.** The
11 coordinator shall prepare and submit to the legislature no later
12 than twenty days prior to each regular session statistical
13 reports for each island including:

14 (1) The status of participating agencies' training and
15 certifications;

16 (2) Training completion rates and certifications
17 disaggregated by agency;

18 (3) Trends in search and rescue incident frequency and any
19 outreach and prevention efforts for the period of the
20 report;



(4) A summary of each county's search and rescue records;
and

(5) Any other information the coordinator deems
appropriate.

The reports shall also be posted on the office's website and
made publicly available upon request, subject to a fee not to
exceed the cost of printing and distribution.

§ -7 Search and rescue readiness and capabilities. The
office shall increase the State's search and rescue readiness
and capabilities by:

(1) Increasing the number of search and rescue personnel
and administrative support personnel to address
planning, communications, training, deployment, and
safety;

(2) Implementing innovative technologies and modernizing
systems to expedite search and rescue resource
deployment in a safe and efficient manner;

(3) Entering into contracts or agreements with federal or
state agencies, counties, other states, corporations,
and authorities, having jurisdiction for search and
rescue, coordination, and response;



1 (4) Coordinating with the Hawaii emergency management
2 agency, department of defense, county police
3 departments, county fire departments, department of
4 land and natural resources, United States Coast Guard,
5 volunteers, county and federal services, and any other
6 participating agencies;

7 (5) Exploring additional opportunities to reduce missing
8 persons risks and defray search and rescue costs,
9 including engaging with:

10 (A) The missing child center-Hawaii program, as
11 established in section 28-121, and the human
12 trafficking prevention program, as established in
13 section 28-182;

14 (B) Insurance companies that cover costs allocated to
15 rescued persons under chapter 137; and

16 (C) Federal agencies to expand opportunities for
17 cost-share partnerships for search and rescue
18 operations and develop strategies to improve
19 search and rescue policies applicable to the
20 State; and



(6) Overseeing the development and maintenance of a comprehensive statewide search and rescue council consisting of membership from the department of defense, Hawaii emergency management agency, department of land and natural resources, office of the attorney general, county fire departments, county police departments, emergency medical services, United States Coast Guard, and volunteer representatives any other participating agencies, including others as requested, tasked with advising on plans, training standards, and policy and funding priorities.

§ -8 Use of search and rescue resources. The coordinator, in consultation with the statewide search and rescue council, shall provide advice and counsel to the governor on the most practical use of the State's search and rescue resources.

§ -9 State search and rescue coordinator; terms of employment. (a) The state search and rescue coordinator shall be appointed by the governor from a list of three names submitted by the department of law enforcement and the Hawaii emergency management agency, with outreach for nominations to



1 volunteer organizations on the islands of Hawaii, Kauai, Maui,
2 and Oahu. The state search and rescue coordinator shall serve
3 for a term of five years. The appointment of the state search
4 and rescue coordinator shall be made without regard to
5 chapters 76 and 89, and shall not be subject to the advice and
6 consent of the senate. If a vacancy occurs, the department of
7 law enforcement and the Hawaii emergency management agency shall
8 meet expeditiously to submit a list of three names to the
9 governor for the appointment of a new state search and rescue
10 coordinator to serve the remainder of the unexpired term.

11 (b) The state search and rescue coordinator shall be
12 qualified to direct the technical and executive work of the
13 office and shall have education or training related to the
14 programs of the office and significant experience in search and
15 rescue operations or related programs.

16 § -10 **Assistants.** The state search and rescue
17 coordinator may employ other assistants and employees, subject
18 to chapter 76, and incur other expenses as the state search and
19 rescue coordinator deems necessary to effectively administer the
20 office. Each assistant shall be well-qualified by technical
21 training and experience in the functions to be performed by the



1 individual. The state search and rescue coordinator may remove
2 any assistant for cause.

3 **§ -11 Salary.** The salary of the state search and rescue
4 coordinator shall be per cent of the salary of the director
5 of health.

6 **§ -12 Recordkeeping.** The office shall keep a record of
7 each search and rescue incident occurring in the State and all
8 facts concerning the same, including statistics as to the cost
9 of each incident; outcome; and whether the incident cost was
10 covered by insurance, and if so, in what amount. All records
11 shall be made public, except information protected from
12 disclosure pursuant to chapter 92F. The records compiled under
13 this section shall include a compilation of the counties' search
14 and rescue records.

15 **§ -13 Community risk reduction program.** (a) The office
16 may develop and administer a community risk reduction program
17 that:

- 18 (1) Emphasizes education and methods for preventing search
19 and rescue incidents; and
20 (2) Encourages the prevention of emergencies and loss of
21 life.



1 (b) The counties may opt into the community risk reduction
2 program to provide resources and localized knowledge of the
3 community.

4 (c) The office or counties may contract with educational,
5 communications and media, or nonprofit entities to assist with
6 the administration of the community risk reduction program.

7 § -14 State search and rescue annual report; deadline;
8 contents. No later than twenty days before the convening of
9 each regular session, beginning with the regular session of
10 2027, the office shall submit to the legislature an annual
11 report regarding the activities of the state search and rescue
12 office in implementing this chapter. The report shall include:

13 (1) A status report concerning:

14 (A) Community risk reduction;

15 (B) Search and rescue incident occurrence and
16 frequency by island; and

17 (C) Incident outcomes;

18 (2) The amount of moneys expended during the previous
19 fiscal year for:

20 (A) Community risk reduction; and

21 (B) Incident occurrence; and



(3) Any proposed legislation, including current or future resource and funding needs.

§ -15 Uniforms; uniform design; response apparatus; search and rescue vehicles and equipment. (a) The office shall provide the coordinator and any staff with standard uniforms, including a jacket, vest, patch, or hat, to be worn in the field so that the coordinator and staff are recognizable to other agencies and personnel.

(b) The state search and rescue coordinator shall specify a pattern and distinctive design for the uniforms described in subsection (a).

(c) The state search and rescue coordinator may enter into agreements with other governmental agencies for the purpose of resource sharing, including the sharing of response apparatus, supplies, search and rescue vehicles, and any equipment necessary to carry out the search and rescue operations.

§ -16 Training requirements; county search and rescue volunteers; assistance to the counties. (a) The coordinator shall establish minimum search and rescue certification requirements by:



- 1 (1) Consulting with the statewide search and rescue
2 council;
- 3 (2) Establishing requirements that are consistent with
4 generally accepted, evidence-based standards for
5 search and rescue personnel;
- 6 (3) Considering best practices specific to the State and
7 traditional and customary practices relating to search
8 and rescue;
- 9 (4) Periodically reexamining and updating the requirements
10 to reflect current best practices, in consultation
11 with the statewide search and rescue council;
- 12 (5) Establishing requirements that are specifically
13 applicable to search and rescue efforts on state lands
14 within the jurisdiction of a county;
- 15 (6) Adopting rules governing the requirements'
16 administration;
- 17 (7) Consulting with stakeholders, including participating
18 agencies; and
- 19 (8) Adopting rules concerning any additional requirements
20 adopted by the counties pursuant to subsection (b).



1 (b) Each county search and rescue department may adopt
2 local requirements for search and rescue certifications that are
3 greater than the minimum search and rescue certification
4 requirements established by the state search and rescue
5 coordinator.

6 (c) The office may provide financial, administrative,
7 technical, or other assistance to a county to facilitate the
8 administration of the State's search and rescue training
9 requirements."

10 SECTION 3. There is appropriated out of the general
11 revenues of the State of Hawaii the sum of \$ or so
12 much thereof as may be necessary for fiscal year 2026-2027 for
13 the establishment and administration of the office of the state
14 search and rescue coordinator.

15 The sum appropriated shall be expended by the office of the
16 governor for the purposes of this Act.

17 SECTION 4. This Act shall take effect on July 1, 2026, and
18 shall be repealed on .

19
INTRODUCED BY:

Elle Cochran

JAN 28 2026



H.B. NO. 2554

Report Title:

Office of the Governor; State Search and Rescue Coordinator;
Counties; Federal Agencies; Private and Nonprofit Organizations;
Appropriations

Description:

Establishes, within the Office of the Governor, the Office of the State Search and Rescue Coordinator to review, assess, coordinate, prepare, and manage plans and resources for search and rescue operations statewide. Sunsets on . Appropriates moneys.

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