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# 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



1 basis within the office of the governor, the office of the state  
2 search and rescue coordinator to:  
3 (1) Optimize resource allocation;  
4 (2) Coordinate cost-sharing and reimbursement  
5 opportunities; and  
6 (3) Reduce the aggregate fiscal burden on the State caused  
7 by multiple departments and jurisdictions having  
8 redundant and prolonged emergency responses.

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

12 **"CHAPTER**

13 **SEARCH AND RESCUE**

14 **§ -1 Short title.** This chapter may be cited as the  
15 Hawaii State Search and Rescue Coordinator Act.

16 **§ -2 Definitions.** As used in this chapter, unless the  
17 context otherwise requires:

18 "Coordinator" or "state search and rescue coordinator"  
19 means the individual appointed to oversee statewide search and  
20 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       (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.

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

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

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

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

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





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

12        **§ -8 Use of search and rescue resources.** The  
13        coordinator, in consultation with the statewide search and  
14        rescue council, shall provide advice and counsel to the governor  
15        on the most practical use of the State's search and rescue  
16        resources.

17           § -9 State search and rescue coordinator; terms of  
18 **employment.** (a) The state search and rescue coordinator shall  
19 be appointed by the governor from a list of three names  
20 submitted by the department of law enforcement and the Hawaii  
21 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.



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        **S -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       § -15 Uniforms; uniform design; response apparatus;

4   **search and rescue vehicles and equipment.** (a) The office shall

5   provide the coordinator and any staff with standard uniforms,

6   including a jacket, vest, patch, or hat, to be worn in the field

7   so that the coordinator and staff are recognizable to other

8   agencies and personnel.

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

17       § -16 Training requirements; county search and rescue  
18       volunteers; assistance to the counties. (a) The coordinator  
19       shall establish minimum search and rescue certification  
20       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).



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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