
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. (a) As used in this section, unless the
10 context otherwise requires:

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

14 "Office" means the office of the state search and rescue
15 coordinator.

16 "Participating agencies" means federal, state, county, and
17 volunteer organizations focusing on search and rescue
18 operations, as identified by the coordinator.

19 "Rescue" means gaining access, rendering appropriate care,
20 and transporting any person by whatever means to a safe
21 environment for appropriate care.



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

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

8 "Search and rescue operation" includes, but is not limited
9 to, searching for any missing or lost person, cave rescue, high
10 angle or rough terrain rescue, urban search and rescue, dive
11 rescue and recovery of drowning victims, inland water search,
12 rescue, and recovery. "Search and rescue operation" may also
13 include any operation permitted pursuant to this chapter.

14 "Search and rescue vehicles and equipment" means any
15 motorized vehicle and equipment used in any search and rescue
16 operation.

17 (b) There is established within the office of the governor
18 the office of the state search and rescue coordinator.

19 (c) The office shall be headed by the state search and
20 rescue coordinator, who shall:



- 1 (1) Review and assess the search and rescue readiness of
2 the State;
- 3 (2) Coordinate search and rescue efforts among local
4 agencies for the State and counties, including the
5 department of defense, county police departments,
6 county fire departments, Hawaii emergency management
7 agency, department of land and natural resources,
8 United States Coast Guard, and volunteers and
9 applicable county and federal services;
- 10 (3) Identify, inventory, and coordinate resources
11 available for searches and rescues;
- 12 (4) Adopt rules pursuant to chapter 91, Hawaii Revised
13 Statutes, necessary for the purposes of this chapter,
14 including rules to ensure operations that
15 organizations specializing in search and rescue
16 operations are certified at the appropriate level;
- 17 (5) Prepare a plan for searches and rescues;
- 18 (6) Investigate and apply for grants and other financial
19 assistance for searches and rescues;
- 20 (7) Prepare and distribute publications relating to
21 searches and rescues;



- 1 (8) Maintain records of all search and rescue operations
2 in the State;
- 3 (9) Coordinate training in techniques of search and rescue
4 operations;
- 5 (10) Maintain and update every six months an interagency
6 emergency response roster of certified personnel
7 responding to incidents; and
- 8 (11) Appoint staff as may be necessary, subject to
9 chapters 76 and 89, Hawaii Revised Statutes.
- 10 (d) The office may:
- 11 (1) Establish headquarters and county offices at places
12 that the office of the governor considers advisable
13 for the protection of the State;
- 14 (2) Operate or designate the use of search and rescue
15 vehicles and equipment during search and rescue
16 operations;
- 17 (3) Use land and buildings for the accommodation of office
18 employees and office vehicles and equipment;
- 19 (4) Contract or otherwise cooperate with any person or
20 public agency for the procurement of necessary
21 services or property, subject to chapter 103D, Hawaii



1 Revised Statutes, where applicable, including by
2 entering into lease agreements and taking title to
3 real property as necessary for the performance of the
4 duties of the office;

5 (5) As an emergency services agency, control and regulate
6 the acquisition, operation, use, maintenance, and
7 disposal of search and rescue vehicles and equipment;

8 (6) Accept and transfer grants, donations, and funds from
9 any source, including services and property, to carry
10 out search and rescue operations and the duties of the
11 office;

12 (7) Provide training, or enter into contracts to provide
13 training services in search and rescue techniques to
14 participating agencies, and other training deemed
15 necessary to execute duties effectively and
16 efficiently; and

17 (8) Perform any other duties necessary to discharge its
18 duties under this section.

19 (e) Beginning with the regular session of 2027, the state
20 search and rescue coordinator shall prepare and submit to the
21 legislature no later than twenty days prior to the regular



1 sessions of 2027, 2028, 2029, 2030, and 2031 statistical reports
2 for each island, including:

- 3 (1) The status of participating agencies' training and
4 certifications;
- 5 (2) Training completion rates and certifications
6 disaggregated by agency;
- 7 (3) Trends in search and rescue incident frequency and any
8 outreach and prevention efforts for the period of the
9 report;
- 10 (4) A summary of each county's search and rescue records;
11 and
- 12 (5) Any other information the coordinator deems
13 appropriate.

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

17 (f) The office shall increase the State's search and
18 rescue readiness and capabilities by:

- 19 (1) Increasing the number of search and rescue personnel
20 and administrative support personnel to address



1 planning, communications, training, deployment, and
2 safety;

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

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

10 (4) Coordinating with the Hawaii emergency management
11 agency, department of defense, county police
12 departments, county fire departments, department of
13 land and natural resources, United States Coast Guard,
14 volunteers, county and federal services, and any other
15 participating agencies;

16 (5) Exploring additional opportunities to reduce missing
17 persons risks and defray search and rescue costs,
18 including engaging with:

19 (A) The missing child center-Hawaii program, as
20 established in section 28-121, Hawaii Revised
21 Statutes, and the human trafficking prevention



1 program, as established in section 28-182, Hawaii
2 Revised Statutes;

3 (B) Insurance companies that cover costs allocated to
4 rescued persons under chapter 137, Hawaii Revised
5 Statutes; and

6 (C) Federal agencies to expand opportunities for
7 cost-share partnerships for search and rescue
8 operations and develop strategies to improve
9 search and rescue policies applicable to the
10 State; and

11 (6) Overseeing the development and maintenance of a
12 comprehensive statewide search and rescue council
13 consisting of membership from the department of
14 defense, Hawaii emergency management agency,
15 department of land and natural resources, department
16 of the attorney general, county fire departments,
17 county police departments, emergency medical services,
18 United States Coast Guard, and volunteer
19 representatives of any other participating agencies,
20 including others as requested, tasked with advising on



1 plans, training standards, and policy and funding
2 priorities.

3 (g) The state search and rescue coordinator, in
4 consultation with the statewide search and rescue council, shall
5 provide advice and counsel to the governor on the most practical
6 use of the State's search and rescue resources.

7 (h) The state search and rescue coordinator shall be
8 appointed by the governor from a list of three names submitted
9 by the department of law enforcement and the Hawaii emergency
10 management agency, with outreach for nominations to volunteer
11 organizations on the islands of Hawaii, Kauai, Maui, and Oahu.
12 The appointment of the state search and rescue coordinator shall
13 be made without regard to chapters 76 and 89, Hawaii Revised
14 Statutes, and shall not be subject to the advice and consent of
15 the senate. If a vacancy occurs, the department of law
16 enforcement and the Hawaii emergency management agency shall
17 meet expeditiously to submit a list of three names to the
18 governor for the appointment of a new state search and rescue
19 coordinator to serve the remainder of the unexpired term.

20 (i) The state search and rescue coordinator shall be
21 qualified to direct the technical and executive work of the



1 office and shall have education or training related to the
2 programs of the office and significant experience in search and
3 rescue operations or related programs.

4 (j) The state search and rescue coordinator may employ
5 other assistants and employees, subject to chapter 76, Hawaii
6 Revised Statutes, and incur other expenses as the coordinator
7 deems necessary to effectively administer the office. Each
8 assistant shall be well-qualified by technical training and
9 experience in the functions to be performed by the individual.
10 The state search and rescue coordinator may remove any assistant
11 for cause.

12 (k) The salary of the state search and rescue coordinator
13 shall be per cent of the salary of the director of health.

14 (l) The office shall keep a record of each search and
15 rescue incident occurring in the State and all facts concerning
16 the same, including statistics as to the cost of each incident;
17 outcome; and whether the incident cost was covered by insurance,
18 and if so, in what amount. All records shall be made public,
19 except information protected from disclosure pursuant to chapter
20 92F, Hawaii Revised Statutes. The records compiled under this



1 section shall include a compilation of the counties' search and
2 rescue records.

3 (m) The office may develop and administer a community risk
4 reduction program that:

5 (1) Emphasizes education and methods for preventing search
6 and rescue incidents; and

7 (2) Encourages the prevention of emergencies and loss of
8 life.

9 The counties may opt into the community risk reduction
10 program to provide resources and localized knowledge of the
11 community.

12 The office or counties may contract with educational,
13 communications and media, or nonprofit entities to assist with
14 the administration of the community risk reduction program.

15 (n) No later than twenty days before the convening of the
16 regular sessions of 2027, 2028, 2029, 2030, and 2031, the office
17 shall submit to the legislature a report regarding the
18 activities of the state search and rescue office in implementing
19 this Act. The report shall include:

20 (1) A status report concerning:

21 (A) Community risk reduction;



- 1 (B) Search and rescue incident occurrence and
2 frequency by island; and
- 3 (C) Incident outcomes;
- 4 (2) The amount of moneys expended during the previous
5 fiscal year for:
- 6 (A) Community risk reduction; and
7 (B) Incident occurrence; and
- 8 (3) Any proposed legislation, including current or future
9 resource and funding needs.
- 10 (o) The office shall provide the coordinator and any staff
11 with standard uniforms; including a jacket, vest, patch, or hat,
12 to be worn in the field so that the coordinator and staff are
13 recognizable to other agencies and personnel.
- 14 (p) The state search and rescue coordinator shall specify
15 a pattern and distinctive design for the uniforms described in
16 subsection (o).
- 17 (q) The state search and rescue coordinator may enter into
18 agreements with other governmental agencies for the purpose of
19 resource sharing, including the sharing of response apparatus,
20 supplies, search and rescue vehicles, and any equipment
21 necessary to carry out the search and rescue operations.



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



1 (8) Adopting rules concerning any additional requirements
2 adopted by the counties pursuant to subsection (s).

3 (s) Each county search and rescue department may adopt
4 local requirements for search and rescue certifications that are
5 greater than the minimum search and rescue certification
6 requirements established by the state search and rescue
7 coordinator in subsection (r).

8 (t) The office may provide financial, administrative,
9 technical, or other assistance to a county to facilitate the
10 administration of the State's search and rescue training
11 requirements.

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

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

19 SECTION 4. This Act shall take effect on July 1, 3000, and
20 shall be repealed on June 30, 2031.



Report Title:

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

Description:

Temporarily 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. Repeals on 6/30/2031.
Appropriates moneys. Effective 7/1/3000. (HD1)

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not legislation or evidence of legislative intent.*

