
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 search and rescue
21 efforts across all jurisdictions. Specifically, this Act



1 establishes, on a pilot basis within the office of the governor,
2 the office of the state 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 Act.

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 to a person, rendering
20 appropriate care, and transporting the person by whatever means
21 to a safe environment for further appropriate care.



1 "Search" means the process of locating a person whose
2 location is not precisely known and who may be in distress.

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

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

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, Hawaii emergency management
6 agency, department of land and natural resources,
7 county police departments, county fire departments,
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 Act,
14 including rules to ensure that organizations
15 specializing in search and rescue operations are
16 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 state search and rescue coordinator shall be a
11 civil service position selected by the governor in accordance
12 with chapters 76 and 89, Hawaii Revised Statutes, and shall not
13 be subject to the advice and consent of the senate. If a
14 vacancy occurs, the position shall be filled by the governor in
15 accordance to chapters 76 and 89, Hawaii Revised Statutes, and
16 shall not be subject to the advice and consent of the senate.
- 17 (e) The state search and rescue coordinator shall be
18 qualified to direct the technical and executive work of the
19 office and shall have education or training related to the
20 programs of the office and significant experience in search and
21 rescue operations or related programs.



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

9 (g) The salary of the state search and rescue coordinator
10 shall be per cent of the salary of the director of health.

11 (h) The office shall increase the State's search and
12 rescue readiness and capabilities by:

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

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

20 (3) Entering into contracts or agreements with federal or
21 state agencies, counties, other states, corporations,



- 1 and authorities that have jurisdiction over search and
2 rescue coordination and response;
- 3 (4) Coordinating with the department of defense, Hawaii
4 emergency management agency, department of land and
5 natural resources, county police departments, county
6 fire departments, United States Coast Guard,
7 volunteers, county and federal services, and any other
8 participating agencies;
- 9 (5) Exploring additional opportunities to reduce missing
10 persons risks and defray search and rescue costs,
11 including engaging with:
- 12 (A) The missing child center-Hawaii program, as
13 established in section 28-121, Hawaii Revised
14 Statutes, and the human trafficking prevention
15 program, as established in section 28-182, Hawaii
16 Revised Statutes;
- 17 (B) Insurance companies that cover costs allocated to
18 rescued persons under chapter 137, Hawaii Revised
19 Statutes; and
- 20 (C) Federal agencies to expand opportunities for
21 cost-share partnerships for search and rescue



1 operations and develop strategies to improve
2 search and rescue policies applicable to the
3 State; and

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

16 (i) The office may:

17 (1) Establish headquarters and county offices at places
18 that the office of the governor considers advisable
19 for the protection of the State;



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



1 participating agencies, and other training deemed
2 necessary to execute duties effectively and
3 efficiently; and

4 (8) Perform any other duties necessary to discharge its
5 duties under this section.

6 (j) The state search and rescue coordinator shall prepare
7 and submit to the legislature no later than twenty days prior to
8 the regular sessions of 2027, 2028, 2029, 2030, and 2031
9 statistical reports for each island, including:

10 (1) The status of participating agencies' training and
11 certifications;

12 (2) Training completion rates and certifications
13 disaggregated by agency;

14 (3) Trends in search and rescue incident frequency and any
15 outreach and prevention efforts for the period of the
16 report;

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

19 (5) Any other information the coordinator deems
20 appropriate.



1 The reports shall also be posted on the office's website and
2 made publicly available upon request.

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

16 (m) The office may develop and administer a community risk
17 reduction program 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 The counties may opt into the community risk reduction
2 program to provide resources and localized knowledge of the
3 community.

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

12 (1) A status report concerning:

13 (A) Community risk reduction;

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

16 (C) Incident outcomes;

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

19 (A) Community risk reduction; and

20 (B) Incident occurrence; and



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

3 (o) The office shall provide the coordinator and any staff
4 with standard uniforms, including a jacket, vest, patch, or hat,
5 to be worn in the field so that the coordinator and staff are
6 recognizable to other agencies and personnel.

7 (p) The state search and rescue coordinator shall specify
8 a pattern and distinctive design for the uniforms described in
9 subsection (o).

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

15 (r) The coordinator shall establish minimum search and
16 rescue certification requirements by:

17 (1) Consulting with the statewide search and rescue
18 council;

19 (2) Establishing requirements that are consistent with
20 generally accepted, evidence-based standards for
21 search and rescue personnel;



- 1 (3) Considering best practices specific to the State and
2 traditional and customary practices relating to search
3 and rescue;
- 4 (4) Periodically reexamining and updating the requirements
5 to reflect current best practices, in consultation
6 with the statewide search and rescue council;
- 7 (5) Establishing requirements that are specifically
8 applicable to search and rescue efforts on state lands
9 within the jurisdiction of a county;
- 10 (6) Adopting rules governing the administration of the
11 requirements;
- 12 (7) Consulting with stakeholders, including participating
13 agencies; and
- 14 (8) Adopting rules concerning any additional requirements
15 adopted by the counties pursuant to subsection (s).
- 16 (s) Each county search and rescue department may adopt
17 local requirements for search and rescue certifications that
18 exceed the minimum search and rescue certification requirements
19 established by the state search and rescue coordinator in
20 subsection (r).



1 (t) The office may provide financial, administrative,
2 technical, or other assistance to a county to facilitate the
3 administration of the State's search and rescue training
4 requirements.

5 SECTION 3. There is appropriated out of the general
6 revenues of the State of Hawaii the sum of \$ or so
7 much thereof as may be necessary for fiscal year 2026-2027 for
8 the establishment and administration of the office of the state
9 search and rescue coordinator.

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

12 SECTION 4. This Act shall take effect on July 1, 3000, and
13 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. (HD2)

*The summary description of legislation appearing on this page is for informational purposes only and is
not legislation or evidence of legislative intent.*

