THE SENATE
THIRTY-THIRD LEGISLATURE, 2026
STATE OF HAWAII

S.B. NO. 2938

JAN 23 2026

A BILL FOR AN ACT

RELATING TO SEARCH AND RESCUE.

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

SECTION 1. This Act shall be known and may be cited as the "Hawaii State Search and Rescue Coordinator Act".

SECTION 2. The legislature finds that the State's unique geographic conditions, including seven hundred fifty miles of coastline and 3,800,000 acres of undeveloped property, pose significant challenges for search and rescue (SAR) operations. The legislature further finds that the State is among the highest in the nation for the rate of missing persons, with recent data highlighting a lack of funding, tools, training, and technology for statewide search and rescue operations that hinder responses and compromise outcomes. The foregoing is compounded by the current fragmentation of search and rescue efforts in the State across over a dozen different agencies and jurisdictions. The agencies lack standardized protocols, as well as a single point of contact who provides daily centralized oversight, administrative accountability, and the inter-agency communication and coordination critical to the success of search

and rescue operations, including missing person investigations. The legislature finds that this inefficient, decentralized, and reactive model delays emergency response efforts among county, state, and federal partners; endangers the health and safety of residents, visitors, and first responders; degrades the environment; and unduly burdens the state economy.

The legislature finds that other states with significant tourism industries, including California, Florida, New York, Utah, and Wyoming, treat comprehensive safety as a fundamental component of their state infrastructure. State-level coordination and oversight of search and rescue operations allow these states to manage reimbursement funds and insurance programs efficiently, capture revenue for reinvestment in their respective offices, and provide a unified search and rescue response across their diverse geographies. Conversely, the State's current fragmentation and fiscally inefficient search and rescue program create a substantial systemic breakdown in the emergency response infrastructure that risks life-threatening consequences.

The legislature recognizes that the establishment of an office of the state search and rescue coordinator would install

a centralized, proactive authority for search and rescue operations; foster unified communication and collaboration among all participating federal, state, and county agencies and volunteer organizations; provide adequate training and resources to improve search and rescue outcomes and reduce costs; optimize resource allocation and deployment; and enhance public safety and fiscal efficiency through streamlined processes. A state search and rescue coordinator would also reduce the aggregate burden on the State caused by the current fragmentation of search and rescue programs into multiple departments and jurisdictions who may respond redundantly to the same emergency. The legislature believes that the newly established office of the state search and rescue coordinator can achieve a self-sustaining level of operational efficiency and long-term cost avoidance by leveraging data to decrease incident frequency, by identifying opportunities for federal and private reimbursement, and by reinvesting tax revenue from the state's tourism-based industry into the state's safety infrastructure.

Accordingly, the purpose of this Act is to improve the efficiency, training, and operations of the state's search and rescue operations, and thereby enhance public and environmental

safety, fiscal efficiency, economic resilience, by establishing the office of the state search and rescue coordinator within the office of the governor.

SECTION 3. 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 **Definitions.** As used in this chapter:

"Coordinator" means the state search and rescue coordinator.

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

"Participating agencies" means state and county organizations, designated pursuant to this chapter, that carry out search and rescue functions in coordination with federal and volunteer search and rescue organizations.

"Search and rescue operations" means any coordinated effort to locate, assist, or recover individuals in distress or danger, including but not limited to:

(1) Missing person searches;

(2) Wilderness rescue operations;

(3) Urban search and rescue; and

(4) Maritime and aeronautical rescue operations.

§ **-2 Office of the state search and rescue coordinator; established.** (a) There is established the office of the state search and rescue coordinator, within the office of the governor for administrative purposes. The office shall be headed by a state search and rescue coordinator, who shall be hired by and report directly to the governor. The coordinator may hire staff, as necessary, without regard to chapter 76.

(b) The office shall oversee all statewide search and rescue operations, including coordination among participating agencies.

§ **-3 State search and rescue coordinator; powers and duties.** The state search and rescue coordinator shall:

(1) Develop and maintain a statewide search and rescue plan, ensuring compliance with federal guidelines;

(2) Serve as the primary point of contact for all statewide search and rescue operations;

(3) Coordinate search and rescue operations involving participating agencies;

(4) Oversee the training, certification, and readiness of search and rescue personnel statewide;

(5) Manage the allocation and deployment of resources for search and rescue operations, including mutual aid requests;

(6) Establish and implement interagency communication protocols to improve coordination and efficiency during search and rescue operations;

(7) Administer the search and rescue special fund, pursuant to this chapter, to support operations, training, and public education initiatives;

(8) Collect and maintain data on search and rescue incidents, outcomes, and expenditures within the State and make the data available to the public as permitted by law;

(9) Promote public awareness and education initiatives to reduce the need for search and rescue operations and to improve public safety;

(10) Adopt rules pursuant to chapter 91 and propose updates to statewide search and rescue policies and

procedures, subject to approval by the office of the governor;

(11) Ensure that all search and rescue operations conducted within the State are executed in accordance with applicable federal, state, and county laws, regulations, rules, and ordinances;

(12) Submit an annual report to the legislature no later than sixty days prior to the convening of each regular session, that includes:

(A) A summary of all search and rescue operations conducted during the reporting year, including:

(i) The number and types of incidents;

(ii) The agencies and organizations involved;

(iii) The outcomes of the operations; and

(iv) Any challenges encountered;

(B) An overview of training programs and certification activities, including participation rates and notable achievements;

(C) A detailed accounting of expenditures from the search and rescue special fund, including:

(i) Separate expenditures allocated to operations, training, equipment, and public education, and for any other purpose;

(ii) Revenue sources and amounts received;

(iii) The remaining balance in the special fund; and

(iv) Any recommendations for the adjustment of expenditures from the special fund;

(D) Recommendations for legislative or policy changes to improve the effectiveness and efficiency of search and rescue operations; and

(E) Any additional information deemed relevant by the coordinator;

(13) Partner with applicable national organizations and federal agencies to establish and oversee uniform mandatory training and certification programs for all search and rescue personnel in the State, including:

(A) Wilderness and urban search and rescue techniques;

(B) Water-based rescue and recovery operations;

(C) Use of technology in search and rescue operations, including:

(i) Cell phone forensics;

(ii) Drone operations; and

(iii) Geographic information systems;

(D) Mass casualty and disaster response protocols;

(E) Search and rescue coordination under an incident command system; and

(F) Federal compliance standards for search and rescue operations;

(14) Conduct regular statewide training exercises to ensure operational readiness and interagency coordination; and

(15) Periodically review and update training programs to reflect advancements in search and rescue technology and methodologies.

§ -4 Participation in training programs. (a) All participating agencies designated pursuant to section -5 shall ensure the completion of mandatory training and the maintenance of active certifications for any of their personnel involved with search and rescue operations.

(b) Volunteer teams involved in search and rescue operations may participate in training programs offered by the office.

§ -5 **Participating agencies.** (a) Under the direction of the coordinator, the following agencies shall participate in search and rescue operations pursuant to this chapter:

(1) The department of defense, including the Hawaii emergency management agency;

(2) The department of land and natural resources;

(3) The department of the attorney general, including the missing child center-Hawaii;

(4) The department of law enforcement;

(5) Each county fire department;

(6) Each county police department; and

(7) Each country emergency services department;

in coordination with the United States Coast Guard, the Civil Air Patrol, the Federal Emergency Management Agency, and volunteer search and rescue teams.

(b) Participating agencies shall:

(1) Designate a liaison officer to serve as the primary point of contact to the coordinator;

(2) Provide regular updates on search and rescue operations, related activities, resources, and capabilities;

(3) Participate in statewide search and rescue training and planning initiatives; and

(4) Comply with policies and protocols established by the coordinator.

(c) Volunteer teams shall be encouraged to participate in training and planning initiatives and operate under the direction of the coordinator.

§ -6 **Search and rescue special fund.** (a) There is established in the state treasury a search and rescue special fund, into which shall be deposited:

(1) Moneys appropriated to the fund by the legislature;

(2) Federal grants designated for search and rescue operations and related activities;

(3) Private donations and charitable contributions; and

(4) Any other sources of revenue permitted by law.

(b) Pursuant to applicable state law, moneys in the search and rescue special fund shall be used, administered, and approved by the coordinator for:

(1) Operational and administrative expenses of the office;

(2) Procurement of tools, equipment, and technology necessary for search and rescue operations and related activities;

(3) Development and implementation of training and certification programs;

(4) Support for interagency coordination and communication systems; and

(5) Public outreach and education efforts aimed at reducing the need for search and rescue operations.

(c) The coordinator shall maintain transparent financial records of all special fund expenditures to be included in the annual report to the legislature.

SECTION 4. There is appropriated out of the general revenues of the State of Hawaii the sum of or so much thereof as may be necessary for fiscal year 2026-2027 to be deposited into the search and rescue fund.

SECTION 5. There is appropriated out of the search and rescue special fund the sum of $ or so much thereof as may be necessary for fiscal year 2026-2027 for expenses of the

office of the state search and rescue coordinator pursuant to this Act.

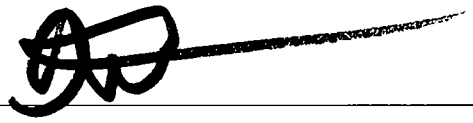
The sum appropriated shall be expended by the office of the state search and rescue coordinator for the purposes of this Act.

SECTION 6. There is appropriated out of the general revenues of the State of Hawaii the sum of $ or so much thereof as may be necessary for fiscal year 2026-2027 for the establishment of the office of the state search and rescue coordinator pursuant to this Act.

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

SECTION 7. If any provision of this Act, or the application thereof to any person or circumstance, is held invalid, the invalidity does not affect other provisions or applications of the Act that can be given effect without the invalid provision or application, and to this end the provisions of this Act are severable.

SECTION 8. This Act shall take effect on July 1, 2026; provided that the state search and rescue coordinator pursuant to section 3 shall be appointed no later than January 1, 2027.

INTRODUCED BY: 

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Report Title:
Office of the Governor; State Search and Rescue Coordinator; Search and Rescue; Search and Rescue Special Fund; Report; Appropriation

Description:
Establishes the Office of the State Search and Rescue Coordinator within the Office of the Governor. Provides for the authority and duties of the State Search and Rescue Coordinator. Designates participating agencies and their duties with regard to state search and rescue operations and training. Establishes the Search and Rescue Special Fund. Requires reports to the Legislature. Appropriates funds.

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