
A BILL FOR AN ACT

RELATING TO SEARCH AND RESCUE.

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

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

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



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

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

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



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

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



1 safety, fiscal efficiency, economic resilience, by establishing
2 the office of the state search and rescue coordinator within the
3 Hawaii emergency management agency.

4 SECTION 3. The Hawaii Revised Statutes is amended by
5 adding a new chapter to be appropriately designated and to read
6 as follows:

7 **"CHAPTER**

8 **SEARCH AND RESCUE**

9 § -1 **Definitions.** As used in this chapter:

10 "Coordinator" means the state search and rescue
11 coordinator.

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

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

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

21 (1) Missing person searches;



1 (2) Wilderness rescue operations;

2 (3) Urban search and rescue; and

3 (4) Maritime and aeronautical rescue operations.

4 § -2 **Office of the state search and rescue coordinator;**

5 **established.** (a) There is established the office of the state
6 search and rescue coordinator within the Hawaii emergency
7 management agency for administrative purposes. The office shall
8 be headed by a state search and rescue coordinator, who shall be
9 hired by and report directly to the administrator of Hawaii
10 emergency management. The coordinator may hire staff, as
11 necessary, without regard to chapter 76.

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

15 § -3 **State search and rescue coordinator; powers and**

16 **duties.** The state search and rescue coordinator shall:

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

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



- 1 (3) Coordinate search and rescue operations involving
2 participating agencies;
- 3 (4) Oversee the training, certification, and readiness of
4 search and rescue personnel statewide;
- 5 (5) Manage the allocation and deployment of resources for
6 search and rescue operations, including mutual aid
7 requests;
- 8 (6) Establish and implement interagency communication
9 protocols to improve coordination and efficiency
10 during search and rescue operations;
- 11 (7) Administer the search and rescue special fund,
12 pursuant to this chapter, to support operations,
13 training, and public education initiatives;
- 14 (8) Collect and maintain data on search and rescue
15 incidents, outcomes, and expenditures within the State
16 and make the data available to the public as permitted
17 by law;
- 18 (9) Promote public awareness and education initiatives to
19 reduce the need for search and rescue operations and
20 to improve public safety;



- 1 (10) Adopt rules pursuant to chapter 91 and propose updates
2 to statewide search and rescue policies and
3 procedures, subject to approval by the Hawaii
4 emergency management agency;
- 5 (11) Ensure that all search and rescue operations conducted
6 within the State are executed in accordance with
7 applicable federal, state, and county laws,
8 regulations, rules, and ordinances;
- 9 (12) Submit an annual report to the legislature no later
10 than sixty days prior to the convening of each regular
11 session. The report shall include:
- 12 (A) A summary of all search and rescue operations
13 conducted during the reporting year, including:
- 14 (i) The number and types of incidents;
15 (ii) The agencies and organizations involved;
16 (iii) The outcomes of the operations; and
17 (iv) Any challenges encountered;
- 18 (B) An overview of training programs and
19 certification activities, including participation
20 rates and notable achievements;



- 1 (C) A detailed accounting of expenditures from the
- 2 search and rescue special fund, including:
- 3 (i) Separate expenditures allocated to
- 4 operations, training, equipment, and public
- 5 education, and for any other purpose;
- 6 (ii) Revenue sources and amounts received;
- 7 (iii) The remaining balance in the special fund;
- 8 and
- 9 (iv) Any recommendations for the adjustment of
- 10 expenditures from the special fund;
- 11 (D) Recommendations for legislative or policy changes
- 12 to improve the effectiveness and efficiency of
- 13 search and rescue operations; and
- 14 (E) Any additional information deemed relevant by the
- 15 coordinator;
- 16 (13) Partner with applicable national organizations and
- 17 federal agencies to establish and oversee uniform
- 18 mandatory training and certification programs for all
- 19 search and rescue personnel in the State, including:
- 20 (A) Wilderness and urban search and rescue
- 21 techniques;



- 1 (B) Water-based rescue and recovery operations;
- 2 (C) Use of technology in search and rescue
- 3 operations, including:
- 4 (i) Cell phone forensics;
- 5 (ii) Drone operations; and
- 6 (iii) Geographic information systems;
- 7 (D) Mass casualty and disaster response protocols;
- 8 (E) Search and rescue coordination under an incident
- 9 command system; and
- 10 (F) Federal compliance standards for search and
- 11 rescue operations;
- 12 (14) Conduct regular statewide training exercises to ensure
- 13 operational readiness and interagency coordination;
- 14 and
- 15 (15) Periodically review and update training programs to
- 16 reflect advancements in search and rescue technology
- 17 and methodologies.

18 § -4 **Participation in training programs.** (a) All
19 participating agencies designated pursuant to section -5
20 shall ensure the completion of mandatory training and the



1 maintenance of active certifications for any of their personnel
2 involved with search and rescue operations.

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

6 § -5 **Participating agencies.** (a) Under the direction
7 of the coordinator, the following agencies shall participate in
8 search and rescue operations pursuant to this chapter:

- 9 (1) The department of defense, including the Hawaii
10 emergency management agency;
- 11 (2) The department of land and natural resources;
- 12 (3) The department of the attorney general, including the
13 missing child center-Hawaii;
- 14 (4) The department of law enforcement;
- 15 (5) Each county fire department;
- 16 (6) Each county police department; and
- 17 (7) Each country emergency services department;

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

21 (b) Participating agencies shall:



- 1 (1) Designate a liaison officer to serve as the primary
2 point of contact to the coordinator;
- 3 (2) Provide regular updates on search and rescue
4 operations, related activities, resources, and
5 capabilities;
- 6 (3) Participate in statewide search and rescue training
7 and planning initiatives; and
- 8 (4) Comply with policies and protocols established by the
9 coordinator.
- 10 (c) Volunteer teams shall be encouraged to participate in
11 training and planning initiatives and operate under the
12 direction of the coordinator.
- 13 **§ -6 Search and rescue special fund.** (a) There is
14 established in the state treasury a search and rescue special
15 fund, into which shall be deposited:
- 16 (1) Moneys appropriated to the fund by the legislature;
17 (2) Federal grants designated for search and rescue
18 operations and related activities;
- 19 (3) Private donations and charitable contributions; and
20 (4) Any other sources of revenue permitted by law.



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

- 4 (1) Operational and administrative expenses of the office;
- 5 (2) Procurement of tools, equipment, and technology
6 necessary for search and rescue operations and related
7 activities;
- 8 (3) Development and implementation of training and
9 certification programs;
- 10 (4) Support for interagency coordination and communication
11 systems; and
- 12 (5) Public outreach and education efforts aimed at
13 reducing the need for search and rescue operations.

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

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



1 SECTION 5. There is appropriated out of the search and
2 rescue special fund the sum of \$ or so much thereof as
3 may be necessary for fiscal year 2026-2027 for expenses of the
4 office of the state search and rescue coordinator pursuant to
5 this Act.

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

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

14 The sum appropriated shall be expended by the Hawaii
15 emergency management agency for the purposes of this Act.

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



1 SECTION 8. This Act shall take effect on July 1, 2525;
2 provided that the state search and rescue coordinator pursuant
3 to section 3 shall be hired by the administrator of Hawaii
4 emergency management no later than January 1, 2027.
5



Report Title:

HiEMA; State Search and Rescue Coordinator; Search and Rescue;
Search and Rescue Special Fund; Reports; Appropriation

Description:

Establishes the Office of the State Search and Rescue Coordinator within the Hawaii Emergency Management Agency. 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. Requires the Administrator of Emergency Management to hire the Coordinator by 1/1/2027. Appropriates funds. Effective 7/1/2525. (SD1)

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

