

HOUSE BILL REPORT

HB 2257

As Passed House:
February 13, 2024

Title: An act relating to supporting back country search and rescue organizations and volunteers through the creation of the back country search and rescue grant program.

Brief Description: Supporting back country search and rescue organizations and volunteers through the creation of the back country search and rescue grant program.

Sponsors: Representatives Goehner, Peterson, Low, Chapman, Davis, Steele, Ramel, Doglio, Berg and Timmons.

Brief History:

Committee Activity:

Innovation, Community & Economic Development, & Veterans: 1/19/24, 1/26/24 [DP];
Appropriations: 2/1/24, 2/3/24 [DP].

Floor Activity:

Passed House: 2/13/24, 97-0.

Brief Summary of Bill

- Creates the back country search and rescue grant program.
- Provides grants to search and rescue organizations for back country search and rescue volunteers' planning, equipment, training, exercise, and operation costs.
- Allows counties, cities, and towns to recover back country search and rescue costs that are not reimbursed through other sources.

HOUSE COMMITTEE ON INNOVATION, COMMUNITY & ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT, & VETERANS

This analysis was prepared by non-partisan legislative staff for the use of legislative members in their deliberations. This analysis is not part of the legislation nor does it constitute a statement of legislative intent.

Majority Report: Do pass. Signed by 11 members: Representatives Ryu, Chair; Donaghy, Vice Chair; Rule, Vice Chair; Volz, Ranking Minority Member; Barnard, Assistant Ranking Minority Member; Caldier, Christian, Cortes, Shavers, Street and Wilcox.

Minority Report: Without recommendation. Signed by 1 member: Representative Senn.

Staff: Martha Wehling (786-7067).

HOUSE COMMITTEE ON APPROPRIATIONS

Majority Report: Do pass. Signed by 29 members: Representatives Ormsby, Chair; Bergquist, Vice Chair; Gregerson, Vice Chair; Macri, Vice Chair; Corry, Ranking Minority Member; Chambers, Assistant Ranking Minority Member; Connors, Assistant Ranking Minority Member; Couture, Assistant Ranking Minority Member; Berg, Callan, Chopp, Davis, Dye, Fitzgibbon, Harris, Lekanoff, Pollet, Riccelli, Rude, Ryu, Sandlin, Schmick, Senn, Simmons, Slatter, Springer, Stonier, Tharinger and Wilcox.

Staff: Jessica Van Horne (786-7288).

Background:

The Military Department administers the comprehensive emergency management program in Washington. One of the emergency management functions is to support search and rescue operations. The Adjutant General appoints a state coordinator of search and rescue operations to coordinate state resources, services, and facilities requested by political subdivisions in support of search and rescue operations. A "political subdivision" is a county, city, or town. To ensure adequate support for search and rescue operations, disaster relief, and protection of public safety and preservation of the lives and property of the people of the state, political subdivisions either establish a local organization for emergency services or management or join a joint organization.

A "local organization for emergency services or management" is an organization created by a state or local authority to perform local emergency management functions. "Emergency management" includes support for search and rescue operations for persons and property in distress as well as aiding victims suffering from injury or damage from an emergency or disaster. An "emergency or disaster" is an event or circumstance which demands immediate action to preserve public health, protect life, protect public property, or provide relief to a stricken community, or when the Governor proclaims a state of emergency.

The chief law enforcement officer of each political subdivision is responsible for local search and rescue activities that are land based. The Department of Transportation, Aviation Division, is responsible for air searches for downed or missing civil aircraft. Search and rescue activities must be in accordance with state and local operations plans

adopted by the governing body of the political subdivision. The Military Department estimates that there are 900 to 1,000 search and rescue missions each year, staffed primarily by more than 5,000 citizen volunteers. Search and rescue volunteers can be reimbursed for:

- costs involved in extraordinary search and rescue operations, such as operations lasting over 24 hours where food and lodging is necessary;
- excessive transportation and rescue costs incurred by out-of-county volunteers;
- compensation for an injury or death;
- personal property damage or loss;
- transportation, telephone or other communication costs; and
- use of personal supplies while participating in emergency management activities.

Summary of Bill:

The Military Department is required to administer a back country search and rescue grant program. The Military Department may use appropriated money from the Back Country Search and Rescue Account to provide grants to search and rescue organizations.

"Search and rescue organizations" are nonprofits that are registered with the Secretary of State or are recognized by the director of a local organization of emergency management or emergency services. A search and rescue organization must have search and rescue as its primary purpose, have its principal place of business established in a political subdivision in Washington, and be recognized by the local emergency management organization of its principal place of business as available for participation in search and rescue activities.

The Military Department may provide grants for anticipated and incurred back country search and rescue costs by search and rescue volunteers including planning, equipment, training, exercise, and operations.

"Back country search and rescue" is a subset of search and rescue that includes locating lost, injured, or deceased persons in remote areas. Back country search and rescue requires specialized training and equipment to: assess and mitigate hazardous terrain or conditions; access injured, stuck, stranded, entrapped, or deceased persons; provide emergency medical and psychological care; and evacuate or transport the rescued persons.

The Military Department may also provide grants to political subdivisions which budget for or incur costs related to back country search and rescue operations that are not available for reimbursement through another mechanism.

Back country search and rescue activities are included as an activity that search and rescue volunteers may receive compensation for.

Appropriation: None.

Fiscal Note: Available.

Effective Date: The bill takes effect 90 days after adjournment of the session in which the bill is passed.

Staff Summary of Public Testimony (Innovation, Community & Economic Development, & Veterans):

(In support) Back country search and rescue creates a real burden on a few counties. Counties with mountainous areas are often called on to do significant rescue, which is typically done by the sheriff's department and volunteers. Chelan County had over 80 back country search and rescue calls in 2020. When a call is received, one of five search and rescue coordinators acts as Incident Commander. While some rescues are resolved quickly, others take considerable resources and time. The expense is incurred by the Chelan County sheriff's office and volunteer groups, and does not generate revenue, although some overtime costs receive Title III money. The volunteer groups are the most valuable asset of back country search and rescue. The dedicated volunteers donate countless hours of personal time to train and assist others.

Back country search and rescue often requires specialized equipment in treacherous conditions, like high ropes, air support, or winter rescues. The equipment is expensive not only to purchase, but also to maintain, repair, and replace such as when it reaches its life-time limitations, is damaged, or is left on the scene of a rescue. Rescuers need personal gear, ropes and rigging, off-road vehicles, motorcycles, and snowmobiles. A wheeled rescue litter, which is a necessity for most back country rescues, can cost \$3,500. Volunteers pay for most of the gear and equipment personally or through donations. Helicopters are expensive to operate; costing \$600 per hour. When a local county needs to use a helicopter to extract an individual, this can create a significant impact to the budget. There is no outside funding for helicopters.

Organizations have committed to make contributions to the fund that the bill would create to make money available to those involved in back country rescues. The account would provide an opportunity for counties, cities, and volunteer organizations to recoup some of the expenses incurred in providing a very much needed service. Having a mechanism for local agencies and dedicated volunteer groups to mitigate some of the costs associated with the often life-saving mission of back country search and rescue should be supported.

(Opposed) None.

(Other) Search and rescue is a critical public safety and emergency management function. Urban search and rescue relies primarily on professional fire departments and law enforcement agencies, which have access to federal grants and funding, and search and rescue efforts are rare. In contrast, back country search and rescue is conducted almost exclusively by teams of trained and equipped volunteers who are directed by local law enforcement officers. Back country search and rescue is frequent with about 1,000 missions per year; this is two to three missions per day.

There is no funding mechanism for back country search and rescue organizations, but the specialized equipment and training is costly. A break apart rescue litter, which is used by almost every team to move victims out of remote areas, costs about \$4,000. Most organizations own different types of response vehicles, like all-terrain vehicles, snowmobiles, drones, and remotely operated underwater vehicles. These can cost thousands to tens of thousands of dollars. The large command and communication vehicles can cost in excess of \$100,000. In addition to vehicles, training, such as basic rope rescue, is an essential skill that costs about \$1,500 for certification. Each diver certification costs about \$900. The back country volunteers must often fund raise to cover those costs, which is a burden for the volunteers' time and a commonly cited reason for volunteer attrition. When vehicles were broken into recently, the coverage under the emergency worker program was not activated so the volunteers would not be reimbursed for their uninsured losses. This program would allow those costs to be reimbursed.

Staff Summary of Public Testimony (Appropriations):

(In support) None.

(Opposed) None.

Persons Testifying (Innovation, Community & Economic Development, & Veterans):

(In support) Representative Keith Goehner, prime sponsor; and Jason Reinfeld, Chelan County Sheriff's Office.

(Other) Kevin Wickersham, Washington Military Department, Emergency Management Division.

Persons Testifying (Appropriations): None.

Persons Signed In To Testify But Not Testifying (Innovation, Community & Economic Development, & Veterans): None.

Persons Signed In To Testify But Not Testifying (Appropriations): None.