

HOUSE BILL REPORT

HB 1625

As Reported by House Committee On:
Technology, Economic Development, & Veterans

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 Stuebe, Nance, Chase, Bernbaum, Waters, Keaton, Mendoza, Richards, Barkis, Ramel, Hunt, Parshley, Springer, Zahn, Davis and Timmons.

Brief History:

Committee Activity:

Technology, Economic Development, & Veterans: 2/4/25, 2/19/25 [DPS].

Brief Summary of Substitute 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 TECHNOLOGY, ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT, & VETERANS

Majority Report: The substitute bill be substituted therefor and the substitute bill do pass. Signed by 12 members: Representatives Ryu, Chair; Kloba, Vice Chair; Barnard, Ranking Minority Member; Cortes, Donaghy, Keaton, Paul, Penner, Shavers, Thomas, Volz and Waters.

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.

Staff: Martha Wehling (786-7067).

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 "frontier county" has a population density of fewer than 50 persons per square mile. A "rural county" has a population density less than 100 persons per square mile or the county is smaller than 225 square miles. A "distressed area" meets one of five criteria based on unemployment and median household income.

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 Substitute 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 expertise 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.

When the Military Department provides grants, it is required to prioritize frontier counties, rural counties, and distressed areas.

Substitute Bill Compared to Original Bill:

The substitute bill specifies that back country search and rescue requires expertise, rather than specialized training. The substitute bill requires the Military Department to prioritize frontier counties, rural counties, and distressed areas when it provides grants to back country search and rescue organizations or political subdivisions.

Appropriation: None.

Fiscal Note: Available.

Effective Date of Substitute Bill: The bill takes effect 90 days after adjournment of the

session in which the bill is passed.

Staff Summary of Public Testimony:

(In support) Counties' search and rescue teams are underfunded and do great work. Providing funding for planning, equipment, training, exercise, and operation costs for the volunteers that perform these life-saving events would support the volunteers. Areas with lots of tourism and recreation require the sheriff to operate search and rescue missions without providing funding. Skamania County has 80 percent forest service managed land and 10 percent state managed land, giving it high recreational opportunity, but also making it the fourth highest in the state for search and rescue mission numbers in 2024. From 2020 to 2021 the number of missions almost doubled. The volunteers are incredible, and need the support for better training, better equipment, and better response times, because they are using their own time and own equipment.

(Opposed) Counties have three concerns with the bill, which may have the countereffect from the goal of the legislation. First, centralizing donations into a statewide pool could disadvantage smaller, rural search and rescue teams by redirecting money to those teams with larger population centers. Second, while specialized training requirements have always been a part of operations, the requirements could lead to training mandates without providing funding. Third, funding and training is needed for a variety of programs, not just back country. This includes marine, off-road, and water rescue. The teams the bill is trying to support could be inadvertently harmed.

Persons Testifying: (In support) Representative David Stuebe, prime sponsor; and Summer Scheyer, Skamania County SO.

(Opposed) Brad Banks, Washington State Association of Counties.

Persons Signed In To Testify But Not Testifying: None.