

VERMONT SEARCH AND RESCUE COUNCIL
2014 SEARCH AND RESCUE REPORT TO THE LEGISLATURE

MISSION STATISTICS

In 2014 the Vermont Department of Public Safety was notified of 59 incidents meeting the definition of “search and rescue” as per Title 20: Chapter 112, Subchapter 002, § 1841.

The types of subjects who were lost were as follows:

HIKING – 18
WANDERING – 11
HUNTING – 8
DESPONDENT – 7
SKIING – 7
RUNAWAY – 2
SNOWMOBILING – 2
WATER/BOATING – 1
OTHER/UNCLASSIFIED - 3

A map showing the geographic distribution of these incidents is attached as Appendix A.

Of the above incidents, 10 resulted in fatalities. 5 of these are presumed suicides, 1 was a drowning, and 1 of unknown circumstances where a man was last seen walking along a road from a bar in NY to his car in VT (subject still not located but presumed deceased). 1 elderly subject was found deceased near where he had abandoned his car in a farmer’s field and left his clothes behind (located 5 hours after report received), and another passed away from a medical event while walking across a field from her home during a snowstorm to get assistance for her husband who had fallen. The other incident was the tragic death of a 22 year old man who was hiking on the Long Trail in May. He called his family late in the afternoon to report that he was cold and wet, and they attempted to locate him. Public safety officials were not notified until the next morning, at which time a full scale search was initiated. The subject was spotted by a National Guard helicopter early in the afternoon in a drainage off the trail where he had succumbed to hypothermia.

Only one of the rest of the incidents involved an injured subject – a hiker who had suffered a minor leg injury and activated an emergency locator device. He was able to walk out with assistance when he was located. All other subjects were located uninjured or found their own way out of the woods.

OUTREACH

Much of the SAR Coordinator's time in 2014 was focused on improving cooperation and coordination between all of Vermont's search and rescue partners through outreach.

Some highlights are listed below:

- Quarterly meetings of the Search and Rescue Working Group (15-16 people at each meeting, total of 16 organizations represented).
- Conducted training for new F&W Game Wardens, and included them in several VSP SAR team trainings.
- Conducted search and rescue orientation talks for fire department mutual aid groups in Franklin, Orleans, Windsor, Windham, Addison, Bennington and Washington counties. Total of approximately 250 personnel attended representing over 80 fire and EMS agencies and departments. Local F&W game wardens were invited and attended each presentation.
- Met several times with US Forest Service personnel regarding coordination of SAR efforts in the Green Mountain National Forest.
- Met with local first responder leadership in Windham County to discuss regional SAR response in their area.
- Conducted 4 SAR trainings for first responders in the Mad River Valley, including conducting practical and written exams to demonstrate ASTM 2209 Land Searcher standard proficiency.
- Spoke at seasonal orientation for Sugarbush, Mad River Glen and Stowe ski patrollers about SAR coordination – over 300 attendees. Also met individually with Killington and Stowe ski patrol and mountain operations personnel to review SAR protocols at those two ski areas. A suggested lost skier protocol and worksheet was distributed to every ski area in Vermont.
- Met with Vermont National Guard, Customs and Border Protection aviation unit, and New York State Police aviation unit regarding MOU's and cooperation for use of their aviation resources to assist in search and rescue.
- Initiated a semi-annual column in the Green Mountain Club "Long Trail News" membership newsletter on search and rescue. This reviews a selection of incidents where hikers required SAR assistance, and gives tips on safe backcountry travel.
- Created a video PSA on backcountry ski safety with assistance from MMCTV (Richmond). The PSA was made available to public access TV stations throughout Vermont, and to date has been downloaded by 14 different stations for their broadcast (Windsor, Springfield, Hardwick, Hyde Park, Stowe, Colchester, St. Johnsbury, Ludlow, Richmond, Woodstock, Manchester, Middlebury, Montpelier and Burlington). Several ski areas also have links to the PSA from their resort website.

LAW ENFORCEMENT TRAINING

Introduction to search and rescue training is now required of all newly certified law enforcement officers in Vermont. The SAR coordinator presented a proposed curriculum which was approved by the Search and Rescue Council, and subsequently by the Criminal Justice Training Council. This class was presented 7 times in 2014, primarily at the Academy in Pittsford, but also regionally in Washington, Windham and Rutland counties to a total of approximately 200 police officers.

SAR DATABASE

The State continues to use DisasterLan to track qualified search and rescue resources. The database is kept up to date by the SAR Coordinator as part of his duties.

VERMONT STATE POLICE SEARCH AND RESCUE TEAM

2014 was a busy year for the VSP SAR Team. They were involved on some level in the 59 incidents mentioned above. Some involved full team responses, some were handled by a fewer number of locally available team members, and some strictly involved coordination of local resources when it was deemed they could adequately handle the incident. In all cases a VSP representative was present on-scene as a liason.

The training program for the team this year was focused on completing the training standards as adopted by the Search and Rescue Council:

- Incident command system training to the ICS 100 and 200 level for all team members, and ICS 300 for team leaders and assistant team leaders. There is now 100% compliance of this standard.
- Successful completion of the National Association for Search and Rescue "Managing the Lost Person Incident" 40 hour search management class. 5 team members completed this class when it was offered in April. There are 3 new members who joined the SAR this summer who will take the class when it is next offered in the spring of 2015. All others had completed this requirement prior to 2014.
- Demonstration of competency of the national ASTM F2209-10 "Standard for Training of Level I Land Search Team Member". All team members have completed this requirement.

The team receive some funding through the Homeland Security Grant Program to purchase some new equipment for the team, including winter boots, headlamps, a personnel/resource accountability tool, and two ATV's with trailers. The team is in need of continuing to update and improve additional equipment, particularly the personal protective gear and clothing that is issued to members in order to meet minimum safety requirements.

SUMMARY

There has been much progress made in 2014. The SAR Coordinator has had personal contact with close to 1,000 first responders in the State, and his outreach message of cooperation and coordination has been well received and appears to be paying dividends in the quality of SAR response. Training standards were established (ASTM F2209) by the council and have been adopted by the VSP SAR team and the Fish & Wildlife game wardens. Training was developed and conducted to meet those standards, and all VSP team members have demonstrated competency through objective testing. Internal VSP policies for SAR response were modified and implemented, resulting in a consistent and effective response system for the state. VSP-DIR-532 "Missing Persons Requiring Search and Rescue" and VSP-DIR-605 "Search and Rescue Team" are attached to this report as Appendix B.

As has been noted in this report, much of the focus in 2014 has been on outreach and improving cooperation and coordination among SAR partners. These efforts will be ongoing, but we encourage a slight shift in focus in 2015 as outlined below:

- Helping to coordinate and provide additional training opportunities to local first responders beyond the "awareness" level.
- Explore ways to increase training opportunities for VSP SAR team members. Currently the team is allocated only 8 days/year for training. This makes it very challenging to achieve and maintain the skills that should be expected of the state's primary SAR response resource (typically volunteer SAR teams train at least once and more often twice monthly).

-Continue and enhance public education efforts, including a PSA or press release during spring hiking season.

-Explore funding opportunities to support and enhance both local and state SAR efforts.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The changes to Title 20 from May 2013 seem to be working well with respect to clarifying roles and responsibilities in statewide search and rescue response and the Council does not recommend any changes at this time.

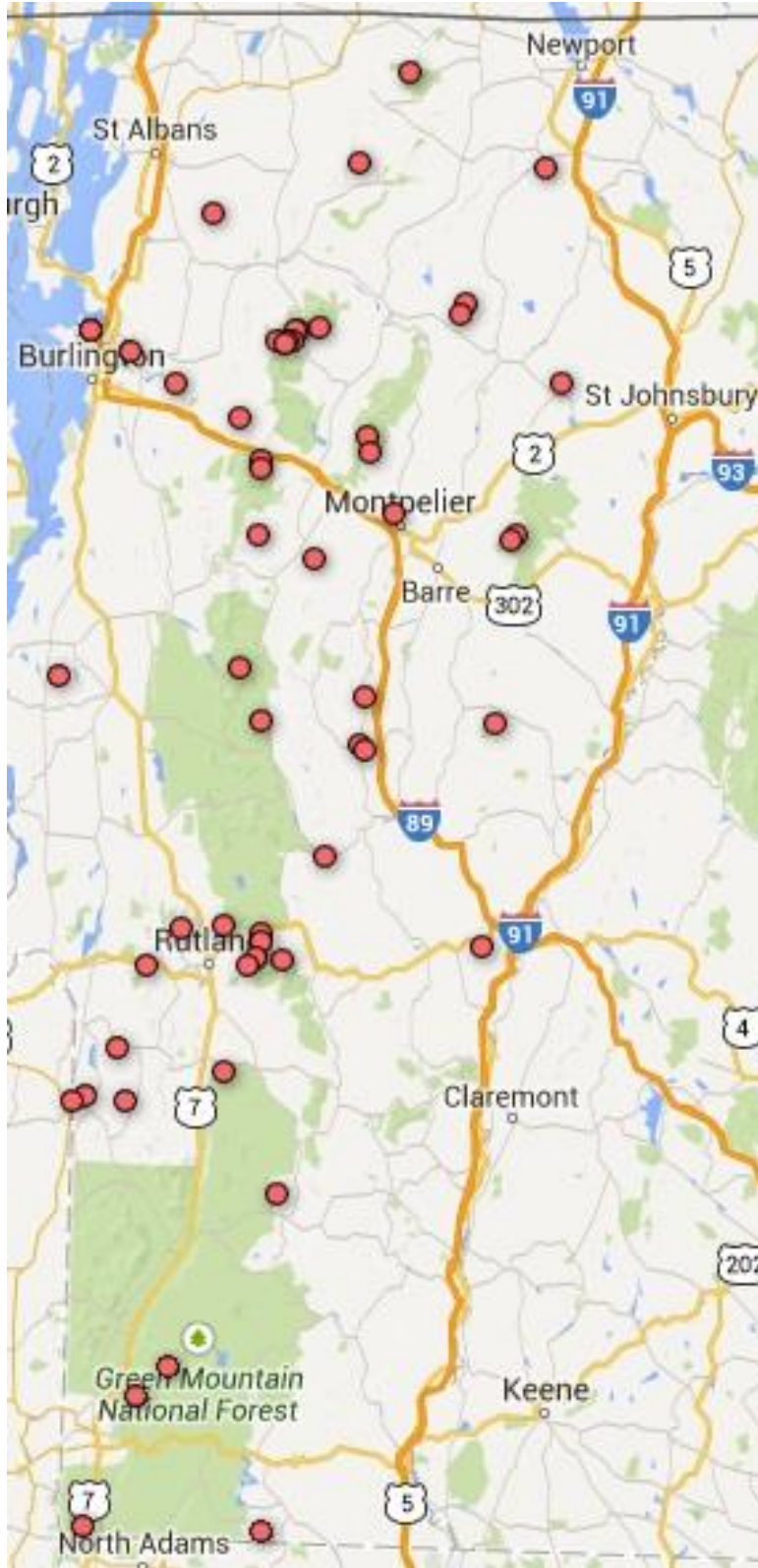
This report was reviewed and approved by the Search and Rescue Council at its meeting on January 13, 2015.

Respectfully submitted,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Marge Fish". The signature is written in a dark ink and is positioned below the text "Respectfully submitted,".

Marge Fish, Chair (Public Representative)
Peg Doheny (Ski Patrol Representative)
Drew Hazelton (Volunteer SAR Representative)
Derek Libby (Professional Firefighter Representative)
Lt. Matthew Nally (VSP SAR Team Leader)
Lt. George Scribner (Fish & Wildlife Representative)
Neil Van Dyke (SAR Coordinator)

APPENDIX A - GEOGRAPHICAL DISTRIBUTION OF 2014 SAR CALLS



Click on the above map for the full interactive version.

APPENDIX B – VSP POLICIES

Vermont State Police | Rules & Regulations



VSP-DIR-532

Missing Person Requiring Search and Rescue

1.0 PURPOSE

1.1 To set forth guidelines for the response to reports of missing person who may require search and rescue and identify necessary reporting procedures.

2.0 DEFINITIONS

2.1 Missing Persons Requiring Search and Rescue - Persons who are missing or lost in the back country, remote areas or waters of the state.

3.0 POLICY

3.1 Missing person cases are unique and serious matters that need to be professionally handled to ensure the best possible outcome. Communications between troopers, and commanders is critical in every missing persons case as is communication between the state police, other agencies and the media.

4.0 PROCEDURE

4.1 Vermont State Police will conduct an initial assessment and respond immediately to any reports of a person who is missing or lost in the back country, remote areas or waters of the state.

4.2 Supervisors will be notified of all missing person reports. If a supervisor is not working at the time of the report, the senior trooper in charge will notify a supervisor on duty in the Troop area.

4.3 A supervisor will respond to the scene and notify the Station Commander/Watch Commander, who in turn will confer with the Search and Rescue Team Leader/designee to determine the appropriate level of response needed based on best practices in search and rescue operations.

4.4 The Search and Rescue Team Leader/designee shall ensure that notification is made to any municipal police and fire departments of the town in which the person is missing and any emergency medical services organizations of that town which are in the search and rescue database. If assistance is needed from the Department of Fish and Wildlife (DFW), a DFW supervisor will be contacted and briefed in order to support search and rescue.

4.5 Prior to dissemination, any press release or statement issued or media involvement during the investigation will be first approved by the commanding officers in charge of the investigation or the Public Information Officer.

4.6 Members will use the Lost Person Questionnaire to obtain the required information for any reported missing person.

4.7 Refer to VSP-DIR-605 Search and Rescue Team Section 3.0.

Effective October 30, 2014

The Vermont State Police Manual is not intended to apply in any criminal or civil proceeding outside of internal Department proceedings. No policy included in this publication should be construed as creating a higher legal standard of safety or care in an evidentiary sense with respect to third party claims. Violations of law will form the basis for civil and criminal sanctions in a recognized judicial setting.



VSP-DIR-605

Search and Rescue Team

1.0 PURPOSE

1.1 The Search and Rescue Team shall be *notified* in all cases in which persons are missing or lost in the back country, remote areas or waters of the state.

1.2 The Search and Rescue Team shall consists of volunteers chosen from Departmental members and serve at the discretion of the Assistant Field Force Commander.

1.3 The Search and Rescue Team Leader shall be chosen by the Assistant Field Force Commander.

1.4 All members of the Search and Rescue Team shall be, and will maintain themselves, in "good" condition as established by the Policies and Procedures under VSP-DIR-106.

1.5 Team members will attend the regularly scheduled in-service training sessions. Members unable to attend must contact either the Team Leader or representative. Failure to attend training without just cause is reason for dismissal from the team.

1.6 Any Team member who cannot participate in an actual search/rescue mission when so requested must contact the Team Leader or representative. Failure to attend an actual mission when so requested without just cause is reason for dismissal from the Team.

1.7 Any team member may be placed into a probationary status for failure to attend either an in-service training, actual mission, or fails to meet fitness standards at the discretion of the Assistant Field Force Commander. Such probationary status shall be for six months and would normally precede dismissal from the team.

2.0 POLICY

2.1 The Department of Public Safety shall cooperate with and support all law enforcement agencies in this State in matters relating to missing persons. When necessary to protect a missing person from harm, the Department shall coordinate local and State efforts to search for and rescue the missing person.

2.2 Activating the Search and Rescue Team.

(A) All requests shall be made through the assistant field force commander, watch commander or in his/her absence, the state duty officer.

(B) Once approval has been obtained, the team shall be activated by the Search and Rescue Team leader/designee, and the appropriate level of response needed will be based on best practices in search and rescue operations.

2.3 Helicopter Support

(A) All requests shall be made through the Assistant Field Force Commander or in his/her absence, the State Duty Officer.

(B) The U.S. Coast Guard will be immediately notified of missing persons on Lake Champlain. In addition to the Coast Guard, the Vermont State Police Marine Division Commander, and any other agency which might have the ability to assist in the operation shall be notified.

(C) As needed, the Vermont National Guard Army Aviation Unit will be contacted via the Vermont Guard Joint Operations Center at (802) 338-3050 for any helicopter support as required. If those resources are not available, the US Customs and Border Protection Air and Marine Unit may be contacted at (518) 324-5200. In cases where a hoist is required for life safety reasons and the National Guard is not available, New York State Police may be contacted at (518) 242-4500.

2.4 Search & Rescue Operation

(A) Per statute the Vermont State Police is responsible for all search and rescue operations. The station commander, or watch commander, or their designee, shall actively participate in the unified command process.

(1) The VSP representative on scene shall be responsible for coordinating any needed criminal investigation, handling of the media (PIO), as well as any overtime issues related to the operation.

(2) In cases where an incident is occurring within a jurisdiction not covered by the state police, the VSP representative shall assist the responsible law enforcement agency with the criminal investigation, media, or otherwise as needed.

(3) The VSP representative will be responsible for updating the Assistant Field Force Commander or State Duty Officer with operational progress.

(B) The Search and Rescue Team leader or his/her designee shall be responsible for coordinating search and rescue operations.

(C) The Search and Rescue Team leader/designee shall ensure that notification is made to any municipal police and fire departments of the town in which the person is missing and any emergency medical services organizations of that town which are in the search and rescue database. If assistance is needed from the Department of Fish and Wildlife (DFW), a DFW supervisor will be contacted and briefed in order to support search and rescue.

(D) The Search and Rescue Team leader, VT Fish & Wildlife Commander and local fire chief or designee shall be responsible for the implementation of all Search and Rescue resources and their respective activation, including equipment needs. Close coordination with local fire, EMS and volunteer organizations is a priority. In the event that a special resource is needed to augment the rescue operation, local assets will be considered first.

June 11, 2012

Revised October 30, 2014