

GREATER PHILADELPHIA SEARCH AND RESCUE

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What to Look For in a SAR Team

Pennsylvania has no state standards regulating Search and Rescue (SAR) teams or their activities. SAR in Pennsylvania resembles the Wild, Wild West in that there are no boundaries and no rules. One need only pull up a wagon and call it home.

Do you know the best way to handle a scent article for a tracking canine? Can you tell where a despondent person will most likely go based on terrain and statistics? Do you know where to best deploy limited personnel to find a missing child during the night? Perhaps a SAR team can help.

So, what makes a good SAR team? When a person interested in joining a team or a public official looks for a resource, what should they look for? These are but a few of the questions that you might come across. The following are purely subjective but hopefully helpful guidelines that will help address these questions BEFORE an emergency occurs.

Personnel

?? *How many members does the team have?* Too few members and the team won't have enough people to independently function on a search. The team won't be able to have more than one shift or possibly even more than one task team in the field.

Conversely, if the team has many members but only a handful attend trainings and meetings, it may indicate internal problems or that it has more names on paper than bodies in the field.

In either case, a team with too few members is potentially unsafe and ineffectual.

?? *Are members professional?* Is the team a social club or a professionally run emergency service organization? A team doesn't have to be all work and no play, but focusing too much on socializing means it forgot its intended purpose.

?? *Do members get along?* Not everyone has to get along all the time, but members should treat each other professionally and respectfully.

?? *Is the membership diverse?* Differences such as background, age and experience often mean interesting growth and evolution. Different people may bring several options to solve a problem, thus increasing the chance of hitting on the safest and most efficient way of performing a task.

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Administration

- ?? *Is the team insured?* Insurance protects the team and its members. A team that uses donated dollars for fancy equipment instead of insuring its members has questionable priorities.
- ?? *How often does the team hold business meetings?* Whether or not they take advantage of it, team members should have the opportunity to contribute to team management and decisions.

Training

- ?? *How often does the team train?* Anything less than once a month for ground searchers means the team probably exists for the glory and not for the victim.
- ?? *How organized are the trainings?* Do members stand around with no direction? Often there are periods of inactivity, but are members gearing up for the next activity or trying to figure out what to do next? Are trainings long enough to make them worth the effort to attend? An organized training usually means an organized search.
- ?? *Does the team train on varied terrain and weather conditions?* All searches don't happen on perfect spring days and rarely in the location where a team trains. Being able to safely adapt to all types of conditions is essential.
- ?? *Is outside training encouraged?* Teams can't function in a bubble. Oftentimes training with recognized specialized organizations introduces new and safer ways of doing things. It isn't always necessary to re-invent the wheel.

Community

- ?? *Does the team provide community education?* A team that accepts public donations should give back to the public in the form of education. Searches don't happen as often as fires and ambulance calls. The time waiting for a search should be spent preventing a search.
- ?? *What is the team's relationship to local officials?* Local fire and police departments call the SAR teams. A team should be proactive and reach out to public officials. Organized search and rescue techniques are new to most law enforcement personnel.
- ?? *Does the team claim to provide unrealistic services?* In other words, a team located in Delaware shouldn't claim to provide avalanche rescue.

For anyone looking for a search and rescue team, the answers to these questions may mean the difference between a successful relationship and a disaster.

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