Washington State
House of Representatives
Office of Program Research

BILL ANALYSIS

Innovation, Community & Economic Development, & Veterans Committee

HB 2257

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 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.

Hearing Date: 1/19/24

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

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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:

Fiscal Note: Requested on January 14, 2024.

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