

Get Wild: Why search and rescue is free in Colorado

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Charles Pitman
Get Wild



Often the first words search and rescue teams hear when encountering a missing person is how much the rescue will cost. Providing free search and rescue services is a policy of the Summit County Rescue Group and the Mountain Rescue Association, the accrediting association of many American search and rescue teams.

Why don't we charge?

First, if a person thinks there will be a bill, they often attempt to get themselves out of trouble to avoid the cost. But if they have been struggling for a few hours to relocate a trail, or perhaps deal with an illness or injury, they will likely compound the situation by delaying a call for help.

Eventually, panic will set in, and we will get the call anyway, but our job is now more difficult, and perhaps a medical situation has become worse. Plus, the rescue won't start until midnight instead of starting at 5 p.m.

What are the costs of a mission?

Our team is 100% made of volunteers, so in most cases, it is the cost of gas for team and personal vehicles. One might argue that some people take off work and should be compensated, but when they join the team, they understand our policy. If a teammate is unable to leave their job or has another commitment, that is fully understandable. That's the reason we have 75 team members but often require only 15-20 for a mission.

As for wear and tear on team gear, the upside of being a very busy team is that we usually receive sufficient annual donations from appreciative rescue subjects and their families and friends to cover mission and training costs. However, it is true that less busy teams may not have an annual budget to cover all expenses. There are methods for those teams to access specific state funds.

We do often deal with individuals who made poor decisions when going on a backcountry excursion. Perhaps they had poor clothing or gear choices, didn't take into consideration the weather, made a poor route selection or underestimated the time for a hike. We try not to second guess a person's decision-making process, but that's not to say we won't try to impart a little backcountry wisdom and advice for their next adventure.

Is a helicopter available?

We have encountered people who have some sort of insurance policy that supposedly guarantees them a helicopter ride out of the backcountry if they become lost or injured.

But where is the contracted helicopter located? Is it available? Is the pilot comfortable flying at very high altitudes, likely at night? Is the aircraft even designed for high-altitude operations? Is the weather suitable? Is there a landing zone anywhere nearby?

We once received a call from an uninjured hiker high on Peak 1. Weather moved in as predicted with high winds, rain, low clouds, lightning and no landing zone anywhere around. The hiker demanded a helicopter extraction because he had insurance. We suggested that he start hiking quickly to a lower altitude.

That said, our team is very fortunate to have Flight for Life located in the county. Their very experienced pilots and flight crew combined with high-altitude-approved aircraft are a resource that isn't easily duplicated.

Our suggestion is to call for help earlier rather than later to take advantage of the available daylight. And we will never charge for search and rescue services.



Charles Pitman

“Get Wild” publishes on Fridays in the Summit Daily News. Charles Pitman is a mission coordinator for Summit County Rescue Group, which he joined in 2004. The all-volunteer team of 70 members never charges a fee for rescues and relies on donations and grants for annual operations.

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