

Get Wild: Are there ever charges resulting from search and rescue operations?

Sports [FOLLOW SPORTS](#) | April 14, 2022

Charles Pitman
Get Wild



A Flight for Life helicopter flies a patient off Quandary Peak during a rescue operation in January.

Summit County Rescue Group/Courtesy photo

In my previous column, I discussed why there are no search and rescue-specific costs associated with missions. But, there could be other costs not directly attributed to the search and rescue team.

The number of agencies that might be associated with any given search and rescue call can be extensive. Besides the Summit County Rescue Group (SCRG), the Summit County Sheriff's Office, U.S. Forest Service, ski patrols, town law enforcement offices, fire departments, paramedics, ambulance services, Flight for Life helicopter staff, Colorado Army National Guard helicopter operators, Colorado Avalanche Information Center and potentially other agencies might become involved depending on the particular mission.

The good news is that few of these agencies charge for their services. Which ones do? Generally, those that provide higher-level medical care and transportation charge.

Flight for Life, and on occasion the Colorado Army National Guard, is very charitable in the use of their services for searches like inserting team members back into wilderness areas, or to pick up a lost person – assuming circumstances like incoming severe weather or other things that prevent them from walking out. Taking the cost associated with these efforts, the team tries not to use helicopter services except in serious situations.

Search missions are free to the lost person – SCRG will never charge. SCRG is grateful for donations, which will help to fund the team's very first facility dedicated to search and rescue for both land and water.

SCRG is fortunate to have several emergency medical technicians, wilderness first responders and even a retired doctor on the team. These highly trained team members can handle most of the injuries and illnesses that we encounter. Some members are on ski patrol and deal with high-level injuries on a daily basis during the winter. Some are on the ambulance service as their regular job. Others have trained on their own initiative as wilderness first responders. All of these team members bring considerable knowledge when dealing with injuries and illnesses in the backcountry.

On occasion, due to the critical nature of the injuries or illness, the patient might require urgent transportation to the hospital. If air transportation is available, the use of Flight for Life becomes an ambulance ride. If air transport is not necessary or available, the patient may be transported via a wheeled litter to the trailhead, and then via ambulance to the hospital. Whether transport by air or ground, these transportation and medical costs are assumed by the patient. The team normally will reserve helicopter medical requests for life- and limb-threatening situations.

Air evacuation is not always available for every mission, regardless of the severity of the injury or illness. The availability of the helicopter, weather, and nature of the landing zone dictates whether air services are used. The agencies and medical staff makes the determination, not the patient.

Considering the extensive number of agencies that might be involved in any given mission, it is amazing that most of these services are provided at no cost to the rescued person. We hope you never need medical services in the backcountry, but if you do, rest assured that they are – quite literally – world class and can save your life.



Charles Pitman

Charles Pitman joined the Summit County Rescue Group in 2004 and is one of 10 mission coordinators. He served on the board of directors for eight years and was a public information officer for eight years.

SUMMITDAILY

Support Local Journalism

As a Summit Daily News reader, you make our work possible.

Now more than ever, your financial support is critical to help us keep our communities informed about the evolving coronavirus pandemic and the impact it is having on our residents and businesses. Every contribution, no matter the size, will make a difference.

Your donation will be used exclusively to support quality, local journalism.

DONATE