



Rescue Teams Stand Ready to Save Lives

by Raam Wong • Journal Santa Fe

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When a lone hiker went missing in the mountains near Santa Fe recently, there were no news cameras around to record his rescue, shivering wet and on the verge of hypothermia.

Days later, the same searchers who saved the hiker would participate in a much larger hunt at Ski Santa Fe for two missing snowboarders, whose dramatic helicopter rescue would make the evening news and newspaper headlines.

But the missing hiker was more typical of the approximately 150 missions that New Mexico's search and rescue teams perform each year: low-key and sometimes life-saving.

The men and women of the state's more than 70 search teams are scientists, doctors and firefighters, who, when the page comes in, reach for their hiking boots, snowshoes and climbing harnesses. If this were the American Revolution, they'd be the Minutemen, ready to go on a moment's notice.

The same weekend earlier this month that the hiker and snowboarders went missing saw three other missions, including lost snowmobilers just across the Colorado border near Chama and a man stranded 200 feet up a cliff near Las Cruces.

The New Mexico Search and Rescue Plan, which became law 30 years ago, has many supporters. They say the plan allows search teams to respond to emergencies across New Mexico, whether it's an injured hiker in the Gila Wilderness or a man stuck in a mine shaft near Santa Fe.

But unlike some other states, New Mexico provides close to zero funding for these critical missions. It's up to search and rescue volunteers to raise the cash for expenses like new ropes and avalanche training.

"We scramble to try to find a radio here and a litter there," said Justin Nyberg, a member of Atalaya Search and Rescue in Santa Fe.

The plan

Stranded on a snowy ridgetop somewhere in the Sangre de Cristo Mountains earlier this month, Adam Putnam and Rachel Fehl finally used their cell phone to call 911.

The Albuquerque couple had hoped to find their way out after getting lost while snowboarding at the Santa Fe ski area.

They hunkered down for the night in a snow cave and slogged up to a ridge the next day. But that afternoon, as a snowstorm hit and the sun sank, they called for help.

Their 911 call triggered a chain reaction among law enforcement authorities and volunteers that has been honed over three decades and thousands of rescues.

Santa Fe's 911 center patched Putnam's call through to New Mexico State Police, which oversees all search and rescue operations in the state.

Police gave the mission an incident number, 080103, a formal step that deputizes search and rescue volunteers as temporary state employees. An incident commander, also a volunteer, runs the mission and is able to call out for resources like snowmobiles, New Mexico National Guard helicopters and extra manpower.

New Mexico also has on-call, specially trained volunteers who serve as area commanders for the entire state during week-long shifts. The commanders are charged with dispatching resources to where they're needed most.

The mission at Ski Santa Fe drew more than 80 volunteers from Santa Fe, Los Alamos and Taos who employed snowshoes, skis, snowmobiles and dogs, braving low temperatures and whiteout conditions.

Putnam and Fehl were finally rescued after the skies cleared on the third day and a National Guard Blackhawk helicopter scooped them up to safety.

A week later, many of the volunteers who participated in the search gathered in a conference room at the Santa Fe Whole Foods for a detailed debriefing of the mission, complete with maps projected on the wall showing where they had searched.

"It was a hell of a weekend," said area commander Gary Williams.

The gathering drew volunteers from across northern New Mexico and illustrated what supporters say is one of the best features of New Mexico's search and rescue plan. By centralizing authority with State Police, it avoids the jurisdictional problems sometimes seen in Colorado, where it's left to county sheriffs to oversee search and rescue.

"If you have a mission that straddles a border between counties you have all sorts of problems," said Devin Kennemore, an Atalaya team member.

The effectiveness of search teams in Colorado may also depend on how much enthusiasm the county sheriff shows for search and rescue, Santa Fe-based volunteers say.

Steve Denney, who runs Colorado's Search and Rescue Fund, said search teams have been known

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