

The History of Search and Rescue in Whatcom County

Search and Rescue operations have been a part of Whatcom County history since 1955, when Bellingham Mountain Rescue (BMRC) was established. From 1967-1970, the Whatcom 4 Wheelers, a group of unaffiliated volunteers, were helping the Sheriff's office with searches in Whatcom County.

In 1970, Whatcom County Search and Rescue (WCSAR) was established. This early group consisted of the Search and Rescue Council, the Women's Search and Rescue Auxiliary (SARA), Explorers Search and Rescue (ESAR), BMRC as well as the 4x4 unit. The units met at the Whatcom County Courthouse, and all equipment was kept at the homes of individual members.

In 1982, permitting began for construction of a WCSAR building on the Smith Road site. In 1984 the initial structure was finished. The building was constructed and housed by the 4x4 Unit, ESAR and SARA. The building was paid for with funds donated by various businesses in the community, and work was completed by WCSAR volunteers, with support from various family members. The materials for the kitchen, offices and work room came from a drug seizure in Sumas. The Sumas building was dismantled, and the salvage materials were brought to the Smith Road location. In 1986 BMRC joined the other units at the WCSAR building and the WCSAR council was unified under one roof.

The current building site is owned by Whatcom County, and ownership for the newly constructed building was transferred to the County upon completion. WCSAR has occupied the building under a lease since 1984. Terms of that lease include having the County pay for the building insurance and utilities, with SAR being responsible for all building repairs and maintenance. That lease expires in 2034.

In 1987, the Whatcom County Search and Rescue Council was established as a 501c3.

In 1997 the storage bays on the east side of the building were expanded. The expansion was paid for by a donation from the Edward Kawagina Memorial Fund.

In 2001 the Boat building was built with funds donated by the 4x4 unit

In 2003 Summit to Sound (STS) was established. ESAR was disbanded in 2010. To date, WCSAR consists of the SAR Council, STS, 4x4, Mountain Rescue, WECG, Snowmobile Team and Dive Team. The Council serves as the administrative umbrella for WCSAR, and each of the units are uniquely trained and equipped to handle a variety of conditions and provide support to the community

Whatcom County Search and Rescue is a resource utilized by the Sheriff's Department, as well as other local emergency service agencies. All volunteers with WCSAR must complete a background check, as well as meet minimum core competency requirements set by Search and Rescue Volunteer Advisory Council (SARVAC) and endorsed by the State Department of Emergency Management. These Core Competency requirements are based on the requirements outlined in WAC 118-04. In addition to meeting the minimum training requirements, individual units have their own training and fitness criteria to ensure that all responders are ready and able to safely respond when called. Volunteers are not paid for their services, and are responsible for purchasing their own equipment and supplies, as well as pay for the cost to respond – food, fuel, time off work, etc...

Common duties of WCSAR include traditional search in wilderness and urban environments, wilderness body recovery, wilderness first aid and pack-out of injured hikers and hunters, urban searches for lost children or dementia patients, evidence search, and scene safety. WCSAR also provides safety patrols for events like Ski to Sea and the Lake Whatcom Classic, as well as education to schools and other organizations. In addition to the traditional search, rescue and recovery activities, WCSAR has played a key role in past years during events that include flood rescue, delivery of PPE and food during the pandemic shutdown, severe weather transportation assistance for critical emergency and hospital staff as well as patients needing life sustaining treatment, and condition monitoring and situation reports during extreme weather events.

Earlier this year, the WCSAR Council was informed that our building will be torn down to make room for a new County Planning and Public Works facility. WCSAR immediately went to work to scout for a new location and began soliciting donations. It is our hope that the County, as well as the community, will help us in our fundraising efforts to build a new WCSAR facility and ensure that we can continue to serve our community in years to come.