

Rescue teams tapped out physically, monetarily

By Nina Keck, NPR

Fresh snow lures a lot of people to do some outdoor exploring, but sometimes that exploring can go too far. When snowmobilers or skiers wander off or get in over their heads, many call 911, putting a strain on already underfunded search-and-rescue budgets.

Some states can bill skiers for search-and-rescue efforts. Often, those who need rescuing wandered into out-of-bounds areas and couldn't find their way back.

In Vermont, state police have had to help find 50 lost skiers in the past four weeks.

At the Killington resort in Vermont, snowboarders are checking out an expert run on the summit, watching others hit the white powder. These folks may not be troublemakers, but there are riders who go looking for fun in all the wrong places.

Bob Giolito, a former Killington ski patroller who is now part of the state police, points to an unmarked trail into the woods. "It's almost moguled up," he says. "You see all the ski tracks? There's high volume of people coming through here."

Areas like these aren't quite accessible. There's a bright orange rope that a person would have to duck under, and several big signs say "Out of Bounds" and "No Skiing Beyond This Point." Despite all that, Giolito says, an alarming number of ill-equipped skiers keep trekking on.

"I mean, if we look out here, you'll see tracks into that field," he says. "Now, if I'm looking out there, I'm like, 'Wow, that looks like some powder, I'm going to ski that.' So

they're going to head downhill. And as they go down, the trees get closer and tighter and tighter, and then they're in a problem."

This part of the ridgeline drops off fast and leads far away from any lifts, so within a few hours, the skiers will be exhausted, cold and in the dark.

Giolito and Vermont State Police Capt. Donald Patch believe more skier education is needed, but how to accomplish that remains unclear. In the meantime, Patch says, the cost to taxpayers for so many search and rescues is troubling.

"When a trooper is tied up on a lost skier case, that's time when they're not following up on their other investigations," Patch says.

Vermont is one of a handful of states that allow billing for certain rescues. But because Vermont depends on skiing and tourism – and because of safety reasons – billing is controversial and rarely used.

"As search-and-rescuers, we feel very strongly that there should never be any disincentive for somebody to call for help when they need it," says Neil Van Dyke, who heads Stowe Mountain Rescue and is a former president of the Mountain Rescue Association.

He says there have been documented cases in Colorado where people in trouble have put off calling for help because they were afraid of getting billed.

But not everyone agrees with that.

Kevin Jordan, who helps run New Hampshire's search-and-rescue program, says "when people get in trouble, they don't hesitate to call."

"They call immediately because they are in trouble," he says.

His program – which frequently handles rescues in the White Mountains, an area known for severe weather – has been less squeamish about billing when it finds that those who were rescued have been reckless or negligent.

Jordan says the policy has stirred up debate, but he doesn't think it deters anyone from seeking help – though he admits there isn't a way to prove that.

“What I did notice is when we conduct the mission, as we're getting this person down, our conversation now is generated, 'Am I going to get a bill?' And that's the only difference I've seen,” he says. “I've seen no effect on tourism.”

But billing isn't ideal, Jordan says. Many people simply can't pay. He says they've collected only about two-thirds of the \$83,000 they've billed in the past five years. And that's just a fraction of the roughly \$1.5 million New Hampshire spent on all rescues during that time.

“It's a very hot debate in this state because people are very passionate and have very strong feelings about it,” Jordan says. “But the problem is that on Monday the bills have to be paid. And when we're not buying equipment and we don't have a training budget and we're sending guys up above tree line in January in 60-below weather, we have a responsibility to ensure their safety – so we're walking a dangerous tightrope.”

It's an issue many states are struggling with.

In Wyoming, a state lawmaker pointed out that demand for search and rescue in the state hasn't necessarily increased. But he says more funding is needed because those who need help are taking bigger chances and ending up in more dangerous situations.