

# Search and rescue missions a monetary dilemma

By Laura Zuckerman, Reuters

After an all-terrain vehicle accident in the Utah desert last spring, 53-year-old Mikki Babineau expected a long recuperation for collapsed lungs and 18 broken ribs.

What the Idaho woman didn't expect was a \$750 bill from the local Utah sheriff's office for sending a volunteer search and rescue unit to her aid, a service for which the sheriff in that county regularly charges fees.



CalStar is the main helicopter company helping with search and rescue in Lake Tahoe. Photo/LTN file

Just a handful of states, including Oregon, Maine and Babineau's home state of Idaho, have laws authorizing local agencies to bill for rescues when factors such as recklessness, illegal activity or false information led to the predicament.

Lawmakers from the Rockies to the Appalachians periodically question why adventurers who incur costs should not have to

pay the price – literally. That debate has heated up this year as legislators in at least two states have sought, so far unsuccessfully, to enact laws to allow fees for rescues.

“In the rare case where a person took unnecessary risks, that person should be sent a bill,” said Wyoming Republican Representative Keith Gingery, who tried but failed to pass such a law in his state.

That few states currently allow such billing is chiefly due to objections by national search and rescue groups, who say the prospect of payment could prompt people to delay seeking needed aid, possibly making a dangerous situation worse.

But that has not stopped lawmakers from considering such laws. Legislators in New Hampshire, for example, are seeking to shore up search and rescue funds by establishing fees ranging from \$350 to \$1,000.

That legislation, designed to address deficits in a state rescue fund paid through licensing of hunters, snowmobilers and other outdoor recreationists, is pending before a New Hampshire House committee.

A similar effort to impose payment in Wyoming came to naught this year after Gingery failed to persuade a state House panel last month to approve a provision to give county sheriffs – who in many Western states oversee search and rescue teams – the right to recover rescue costs.

The issue came to the fore last winter in the state’s Teton County, home to mountains as perilous as they are scenic, when a group of snowmobilers entered the back country near a steep pass northeast of Jackson Hole and required a helicopter rescue.

When the county later asked them to contribute to the \$14,000 cost of the operation, an attorney for the snowmobilers wrote a letter contending local officials had no authority to ask

for reimbursement.

Wyoming's Gingery and other backers of billing those saved say the issue is broader than money. Billing for rescues, they argue, would place ill-prepared hikers, skiers and snowmobilers, especially those engaged in extreme sports, on notice.

Recent advancements in outdoor equipment, navigational devices and off-road vehicles are allowing greater access to remote areas by more people with fewer outdoors and survival skills, complicating rescue missions, Gingery said.

Rescue expenses are also rising in states like Idaho, where gas taxes cover part of the tab. Since July, nearly \$85,000 has been distributed for searches from a state fund. That compares to roughly \$63,000 for all of fiscal year 2012 and about \$71,000 the year before, Idaho State Police documents show.

Search and rescue groups say their services make up just a fraction of the emergency costs incurred by law enforcement and medical agencies nationwide, and that efforts to bill for rescues are tied to rare but highly publicized incidents in which the stranded made foolish errors in judgment.

"There is a lot of hue and cry about recovering rescue costs, but we never question people's right to dial 911 for authorities, fire departments and paramedics and we don't begrudge those costs," said Howard Paul, spokesman for the Colorado Search and Rescue Board, which oversees 50 volunteer teams in that state.

Colorado logged 1,428 missions in 2010, the most recent year data was available. While that was a high for search and rescue operations compared to the four preceding years, the record since 1995 was set in 2002 with 1,582 missions.

Dan Lack, chairman of the Rocky Mountain Rescue Association,

said the specter of paying for a rescue can instill fear in some of those in need.

He was on hand in August when a climber became wedged between rocks in the Colorado mountains and ordered people who became aware of his plight not to call for help because he didn't want to be charged. They dialed 911 anyway.

"If others had not alerted us, he wouldn't have called for help until the sun went down, thunderstorms came in and my teammates and I would have been in danger," Lack said.

"I, for one, am happy to go out and rescue someone, free of charge, who's had a bad day," he said.

That ethos has underpinned 40 years of rescue work for Roger Beckett, resource coordinator for Olympic Mountain Rescue in Washington state, where lawmakers have unsuccessfully floated bills to force payment for rescues. Volunteer teams have opposed those proposals every time, he said.

Beckett said poor judgment, if defined loosely, and the lesser evil of inexperience are chief reasons for rescues.

"Inexperience won't get you in trouble but it will keep you from getting out of trouble," he said, adding he finds no fault in the relative few whose misadventures trigger a rescue.

"Every day you get out of bed, you take a risk," he said. "Should we bill you?"