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In case of the worst

A federal safety net extended to rescuers

The federal Public Safety Officers Benefit (PSOB) program was amended in 2013 and it now includes SAR personnel, as well as certain EMS responders.

The PSOB is a program created by Congress in 1976 to support publically employed (federal, state or local government) peace officers, EMS personnel and firefighters killed or disabled in the line of duty. The program, administered by the Bureau of Justice Assistance within the U.S. Department of Justice, provides a large death benefit—currently \$328,612.73—to the family of those killed or catastrophically injured in the line of duty. It also provides educational benefits to dependents of those killed or disabled in the line of duty.

The act has been amended several times since 1976, and was changed at the very end of December, 2012 by the Dale Long Public Safety Officers' Benefits Act of 2012. The Act was ultimately included as part of the National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2013. Passage was a three-year effort by Vermont Senator Patrick Leahy, supported predominantly by national and state EMS organizations. It was named for a Bennington, Vermont EMT killed in an ambulance crash.

The National Association for Search and Rescue signed on as a supporter and monitored the process, to ensure that SAR personnel were included.

SAR and EMS added

Volunteer members or employees of non-profit rescue squads or ambulance crews “engaging in rescue activity or the provision of EMS” were added to the categories of those now covered. Rescue squad or ambulance crew means a squad or crew whose members are rescue workers, paramedics, emergency medical technicians, health-care responders or other similar “workers.” This includes air-ambulance crews. They must be “trained in rescue activity or the provision of emergency medical services.” They also must:

- Have legal authority and responsibility,
- engage in rescue activity;
- or provide emergency medical services

Fortunately, “rescue activity” means “search or rescue assistance in locating or extracting from danger persons lost, missing, or in imminent danger of serious bodily harm.” So, what we would call a traditional land SAR team’s members fall within the definition.

And the non-profit entity serving the public must be “officially authorized or licensed to engage in rescue activity or to provide emergency medical services.”

Only non-profit rescue and EMS organizations were added. For-profit organizations, such as an air-ambulance crew from a for-profit hospital or staff of a for-profit ambulance service, were specifically left out of the bill in order to avoid opposition from some segments of the emergency service community.

The federal law (42 USC Ch. 46 Subchapter XII) also now covers training, by stating (in 3796b Sec. 1204) line-of-duty action includes “taking part (as a trainer or trainee) in an official training program of his public agency for such activity, and such agency (or the relevant government) legally recognizes it to have been such at the time performed (or, at a minimum, does not deny (or has not denied) it to have been such).”

Claims must be filed within three years of the incident.

This is but a general overview of changes that affect SAR. Detailed information is available from several sources:

- https://www.psob.gov/files/PSOB-Final_Rule.pdf
- https://www.bja.gov/Programs/PSOB/PSOB_Act_and_Regulations_2011.htm#DefinitionsSecStat
- <https://www.psob.gov/index.html>

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