



Preparing for the worst: Kent County Search and Rescue team hones skills for every situation

Published: Sunday, May 15, 2011, 8:00 AM



By **Greg Chandler | The Grand Rapids Press**



Cory Morse | The Grand Rapids Press

Volunteers take part in Kent County Search and Rescue training recently at Fallasburg County Park in Lowell.

LOWELL -- On a recent cold, rainy spring night, about 30 Kent County Search and Rescue team volunteers were practicing their skills, going down hillsides and crossing streams, hitching themselves to heavy ropes and rappelling off a bridge at Fallasburg Park — all while wearing heavy packs.

On a night when it would have been much easier to curl up on a couch with a book, the men and women were preparing themselves for any situation where they might be needed to find someone who is lost or missing.

"We roll, no matter what time of day, no matter what the weather conditions," said Brian Toronyi, a member of SAR since 2009.

Founded in 2004, SAR is a division of the Kent County Radio Amateur Civil Emergency Service (RACES), which falls under the jurisdiction of the Sheriff Department's emergency management division. The unit, which consists of about 50 volunteers, has the responsibility of locating, assisting and transporting missing persons in Kent and surrounding counties.

"When these guys show up with the bloodhounds and their (search) teams, it is a comfort to the officers and to the families," said Lt. Jack Stewart, head of Kent County's emergency management department.

"They've met and exceeded all expectations. They're very professional, very well organized," Stewart said.

Toronyi, the marketing coordinator for SAR, joined after seeing a demonstration at a National Night Out observance in Kentwood. He volunteered in the past with several organizations, including the Kentwood Fire Department. He thought search and rescue would be a natural fit for continuing his interest in community service.

"You end up living it. You breathe it. It becomes part of your life," Toronyi said.

SAR volunteers are required to go through an extensive training program, including online emergency management courses through the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA), classes to acquire an amateur radio license, and first aid courses. They also must pass a criminal background check, said Helene Castle, a Wyoming resident who has been a SAR member since 2005 and serves as the organization's human resources coordinator.

"As a mother, I think about what kind of people I would want looking for my children," Castle said. She joined SAR while she was working on her criminal justice degree from the University of Phoenix and is a mother of five. "We don't just accept anyone. We're careful about who we accept."

SAR has become a family affair for Castle. Her husband, Bill, joined the organization in 2010 and some of their children have participated in SAR exercises.

"When we have the canine training, our children will pretend to be lost for the dogs," Castle said. "I want my kids to learn to be active in the community, too."

As part of their ongoing training, SAR volunteers are placed in situations where they have to survive, only with what they have on their back. Chuck Hayden, an SAR veteran of nearly 20 years and the training coordinator for Kent County SAR, usually carries an 8-by-10-foot section of Tyvek in his pack. It is the same material used to waterproof homes and it is an effective alternative to tarp material.

"It's very tough, it's very light, it's breathable," he said.

Hayden also usually carries ropes, fire starting materials such as flint, and a compass.

During one exercise last month, Kent County SAR volunteers participated in an eight-hour navigation course where they had to deal with rugged conditions and find their way through thick brush to specific points.

"Michigan has plenty of urban search and rescue teams," Hayden said. "There is a weakness (among most search



Cory Morse | The Grand Rapids Press

Chuck Hayden walks across a creek that drains into the Flat River. Hayden, the training coordinator, was preparing a rope crossing of the creek.

and rescue organizations) in going out into the woods to look (for missing people)."



Cory Morse | The Grand Rapids Press

Tim Hower rappels down a hill in the rain during a recent training session.

Volunteers attend several meetings and training sessions each month. While time commitments vary, a typical volunteer can spend at least 20 hours a month in various SAR activities, Toronyi said.

In addition, volunteers cover the cost of their own gear, uniforms and other expenses.

The organization receives about 50 calls a year asking for help in locating someone, with some of the calls coming from neighboring counties such as Ionia, Allegan, Newaygo and Muskegon, Toronyi said.

"Roughly half of the calls get called off before we get to the scene because the subject has been

located," he said. "We get calls for missing kids, we get calls for despondent adults, dementia adults."

While most searches in Kent County don't involve navigating rugged areas, that training has come in handy when the team was called out last winter to look for a missing skier near the Cannonsburg Ski Area in below-zero conditions,

Not every search ends on a positive note, but SAR volunteers said their efforts are worth the time they put in.

"It can be very stressful and hard at times, but it's very worthwhile work, even when we have a sad outcome, it's still closure for a family," Castle said. "It makes you feel so good when you find someone safely and get them back to their family."

© 2012 MLive.com. All rights reserved.