

TITLE

GEOGRAPHICALLY CHALLENGING PATIENT ACCESS / BACK COUNTRY RESCUE

SCOPE

Provincial Emergency Medical Services

DOCUMENT

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Senior Provincial Director and Chief Paramedic

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Director EMS Clinical Operations, Calgary Zone

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NOTE: The first appearance of terms in bold in the body of this document (except titles) are defined terms – please refer to the Definitions section.

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OBJECTIVES

- To provide guidance and ensure the delivery of safe, quality care while responding to requests for Emergency Medical Services (EMS) during events which pose non-traditional patient access challenges.
- To promote a multi-disciplinary collaborative approach during geographically challenging events to enhance patient, staff and public safety.
- To articulate the value of aligning challenging patient access events with the Alberta Health Services (AHS) **EMS Emergency Management Plan (EMP)** and implementing the **Incident Command System (ICS)** to accomplish the strategic outcomes of safe patient care.

PRINCIPLES

- AHS EMS is committed to preserving staff safety while delivering the safest, highest quality care possible to patients in any environment.

APPLICABILITY

Compliance with this document is required by all Alberta Health Services employees, members of the medical and midwifery staffs, students, volunteers, and other persons acting on behalf of Alberta Health Services (including contracted service providers as necessary).

ELEMENTS**1. Safety Considerations**

- 1.1 EMS Staff safety is of paramount importance at all times. EMS is focused on the treatment and transportation of the sick and injured. Search and rescue (SAR)

activities are not included in our mandate however we may be asked to participate in coordination of these events.

- 1.2 Most rescue activities can only be conducted during daylight hours and good weather. Regardless, EMS Staff must always be aware of potential risks associated with these types of events, including but not limited to;
 - a) Exposure to environmental and geographical elements
 - b) Limited access to appropriate equipment and clothing
 - c) Unanticipated overnight stays
 - d) Becoming lost enroute to the patient, and
 - e) Personal injury due to terrain or inadequate gear
- 1.3 EMS Staff should decline to participate in rescue activities they deem to be unsafe or beyond their personal abilities or training. Purposeful risk management strategies must be considered by each EMS Staff member in consultation with their **EMS Manager** (i.e. Supervisor or Team Lead) and **Incident Commander**.

2. Rescue Events

- 2.1 In Alberta the province is responsible for ground SAR events (GSAR). The Royal Canadian Mounted Police (RCMP) in their capacity as our provincial police are responsible for operational GSAR in their area of jurisdiction which includes much of Alberta's back country. Requirements for SAR services should be directed to the RCMP **Watch Commander** or to the local law enforcement agency of jurisdiction as necessary.
 - a) In some areas of the province the RCMP may delegate this responsibility to local authorities.
- 2.2 Requests for Air Ambulance resources by EMS Staff must follow provincial and locally established AHS processes and be confirmed with the agency responsible for scene command.
- 2.3 Geographically challenging patient access events shall be considered and executed as either a **Front Country** or a **Back Country** event.
- 2.4 Front country events:
 - a) These events may be undertaken if **Non-Technical** in nature and coordinated locally with the responding agencies utilizing an ICS model, if they can be concluded in approximately one hour or less.
 - b) RCMP or local police authority and EMS Manager (i.e. Supervisor or Team Lead) notification is required prior to EMS Staff commencing a rescue.

2.5 Back country and/or **Technical** rescue events:

- a) EMS staff will not participate in a back country event and/or attempt any technical activities without permission from their immediate EMS Manager (i.e. Supervisor or Team Lead) and the Incident Commander.
 - (i) If approval to participate is obtained, participating EMS Staff must be accompanied by a SAR technician, police officer and/or designate.
 - (ii) EMS Staff that do have appropriate certifications/qualifications for technical rescue situations may not operationalize these skills while working on behalf of AHS EMS.
- b) These events benefit from utilization of an ICS model and Unified Communication Coordination Strategy (UCCS) in the interest of connecting all co-responding agencies (i.e. EMS, Fire, RCMP etc.).

DEFINITIONS

Back Country means events not easily reached by vehicle or a short walk therefore the risk to staff and patients is higher with a possibility that participants could be exposed to the environment for an extended period, as well as, the terrain could be hazardous to untrained personnel. All EMS Staff involved in these types of rescues requires supervisor authorization and would work under the direct supervision of the rescue team leader. Each EMS Staff member involved must be deemed competent by their EMS Manager (i.e. Supervisor or Team Lead), fully briefed of the operation and equipped to participate.

Emergency Management Plan (EMP) means the emergency disaster response framework approved by senior leadership for managing significant events by AHS EMS staff.

EMS Manager means the person responsible to oversee clinical operations in accordance with the Delegation of Human Resource Authority Chart. Given the variation of leadership levels across the province, functionally this may translate to; supervisor, coordinator, or team leader.

Front Country means an event that is within close proximity to a roadway and may be accessible by vehicle or a short walk. This terrain normally poses very low risk to staff however; consideration of environmental exposure still requires consideration. A front country rescue should be completed in approximately one hour or less, if this is not possible the event is to be considered as backcountry. In most cases, the EMS Staff would walk in with the rescue team and treat while the rescue team arranged safe transport out to the ambulance.

Incident Commander means the person in charge at the incident and is fully qualified to manage it. Sets objectives and priorities, has overall responsibility at the incident or event.

Incident Command System (ICS) means a system that has been adopted by Alberta Health Services to organize internal operations of all Emergency Operations Centers and Scene/Service Command Posts. For inter provincial coordination this aligns with other Alberta Government organizations such as Alberta Emergency Management Agency and Environment

and Sustainable Resource Development. Incident Command System is constructed on the five major management activities of Command, Operations, Planning, Logistics, and Finance/Administration.

Non-Technical means minimal equipment or training is required to be successful. A non-technical event may be in close proximity to a roadway such as a simple retrieval of a patient from a short distance down a marked trail or it could include a lengthy noncomplex rescue from the back country. EMS Manager (i.e. Supervisor or Team Lead) notification of any such event is mandatory prior to commencement of the rescue, however direct oversight is not required and EMS Staff shall make all judgements in the interest of their personal safety.

Technical means specialized equipment and training are required to be successful. All technical events carry a high level of associated risk, requiring oversight by an EMS Manager (i.e. Supervisor or Team Lead) and an incident commander. EMS Staff may not be directly involved in the rescue work but their expertise may be best utilized as a member of the unified command structure coordinating appropriate resources. A technical event may be in close proximity to a roadway such as a vehicle down a steep embankment or it could be deep in the back country. Rescues requiring long-line helicopter, rescue helicopter, ice rescue, confined spaces, off highway vehicles (OHV) such as a quad, boat, or steep slope rope rescue to be successful are considered technical in nature. These responses would only be carried out in conjunction with a professional rescue team and all staff involved would have appropriate safety gear and clothing in case they are not able to return to their vehicle in a timely manner.

Unified Communication Coordination Strategy (UCCS) means a teleconference facilitated by the EMS Dispatch, Communication and Deployment Centre and should include, but is not limited to; EMS Deployment Manager, EMS Manager (i.e. Supervisor or Team Lead), responding EMS Staff, representative of local law enforcement, local rescue agency (as requested by local law enforcement), EMS Air Ambulance (as needed), associated dispatch centres (as needed), and STARS (as needed).

Watch Commander means the most senior RCMP officer on shift (e.g. Detachment Commander, Shift Supervisor).

REFERENCES

- Alberta Health Services Resources:
 - AHS EMS Emergency Management Plan (EMP)
- Non-Alberta Health Services Documents:
 - Incident Command System 100 Module 1: ICS Orientation for Health Professionals.
 - Incident Command System 200 Modules 2 to 6.

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