



So you want to help with the search you see on the news?

Please Read This First.

The news reports are troubling. A young girl is missing. You can imagine the terror you would feel if it were your child. You would be horrified. You ARE horrified. There must be something you can do. The incident is on the other side of the county and you don't have to be to work until Monday. You decide they need your help and off you go to help this little girl.

As a search and rescue responder who has hundreds of hours of training, half a dozen national certifications in search and rescue, evaluates the national SAR exams, and has thousands of hours in the field, I beg you to reconsider.

I know you're thinking you can be "an extra set of eyes", that search and rescue is as easy as walking arm in arm in the pine tree rows looking for a little person. But, please listen to what I have to say before you head over to start your search.

Are you willing to undergo a criminal background check? A good number of people who are gathered in the volunteer pool probably would NOT pass a check. These "well-meaning volunteers" could include people from the list of sex offenders that are normally investigated in a missing child case, to the felons who have outstanding warrants. While you may assume that everyone is there to do "good" and help this little child, are you willing to take the risk for your child? There have been dozens of cases where the person who caused the missing person actually becomes a searcher. Sad but true – it happens. Now imagine that 200 people show up to help out. Do we (as the search incident commander) want to submit them all to background checks before they go out to the field? Or do we just send them out and take our risks?

Do you know what you are doing? Facebook pages always light up with the comments about helping out and an "extra set of eyes". I have even spotted posts that mock the term "trained search and rescue" personnel, as if anyone can do search and rescue. After all, how hard can it be, looking for a person in the woods?

Well, it can be hard. The National Association for Search and Rescue keeps statistics for something called "probability of detection". Essentially, it is the probability that a person will detect an object in their search lane. They have tested this with untrained and trained searchers. What they found was that a "spontaneous volunteer" (someone who shows up at a scene with no training) has a probability of 20-30%. A trained and certified searcher? 50%-60%. That is 2-3 times the ability of an untrained searcher. Believe me, I have to fail some really good people because their eye sight is bad or they just can't find all the clues. You have to train, learn the techniques and master your patience to get that good.

What is trained and certified mean? A Nationally Certified SARTECH II certification is a person who was "tested" to find at least 50% of the items hidden in their search lane. They have to "prove" they can find a minimum of 50% of the items before they are certified. Only then, can they go to the field. Our team trains to the 70% standard.

Then consider other search training in vision theory, sound sweeps, back scanning, triangulation, search exercises and many hours spent practicing protocol and you have someone that law enforcement can trust to send out to the field to find an object.

Add to that all of the other training from Land Navigation, Survival, Crime Scene Preservation, Man tracking, first aid and a number of other items can make a huge difference in the success of a search.

Do you know how to track a person or look for signs of human passage? Trained & Certified searchers do. In fact, they have to learn man tracking and prove by exam that they understand the concepts and demonstrate their

Kent County Search and Rescue/Kent County Emergency Services Team, ©2013 All Rights Reserved
www.kentcountysar.org



tracking abilities. Most spontaneous volunteers not only do not know how to track, they typically destroy evidence by walking, driving, riding horses, and ATVs through the woods on their own. These well-meaning actions often make our job very difficult and unfortunately impossible in many, many cases.

Do you know our Search Techniques? As we search an area, every 50-75 meters we do a sound sweep. A sound sweep is a coordinated effort of all searchers to cover their ears and yell the subject's name all at once. Then, we uncover our ears and listen for a response for about 10 seconds. This works very well in finding a missing child that can still respond. It works well, UNLESS there are dozens of other volunteers randomly calling a victim's name whenever they feel like it. This actually makes it hard to impossible to hear the cries of a little girl calling in the woods.

We also use dogs to search for missing persons. Some dogs are trained to find "any" human scent, these are called "air scent dogs". Imagine the difficulties of searching a 40 acres woods with an air scent dog when 3 spontaneous searchers are spilling their scent for the dog to pick up. Again, it makes our job very hard and often impossible.

These are only two examples, but there are dozens of other techniques that we use that takes training and practice to understand and master to work with a search and rescue team.

Do you know what to do when the Search Area turns into a Crime Scene? Another sad but true fact, search areas turn into crime scenes. Now imagine if you spent hours in the woods that suddenly becomes the scene of a possible kidnapping or even worse. Then you realize you just wandered into an area with good intentions and have, in fact, destroyed or altered evidence that will set a criminal free. Do you know what to do to protect the scene? Are you trained to properly document evidence? Handle a suicide victim? Very few Spontaneous Searches see the bad side of searchers. This can make our job very difficult.

Trained searchers are trained on how to react to a crime scene. Their search techniques are careful to preserve evidence, spot evidence, observe human sign and how to handle a crime scene.

Can You Spend 11 hours Searching Rugged, Wooded Terrain? Our team has minimum physical fitness standards and must pass a test every year to prove it. So many times on a search we have to arrange for transportation and care of spontaneous searchers because they can't search for more than an hour or two. We have had volunteers just leave the search line 100 yards into a search and return home. This not only leaves a gap in the search line, but when we take roll call, we realize someone is missing. Which now has created TWO subjects that we must search for. Add to the number of volunteers who must be transported back to staging and we have to use a lot of trained resources taking care of those who weren't prepared for the rigors of long nights in the woods.

Do you have the proper gear? Household flashlights that help you see when the power goes out or to fix the furnace don't belong in a search operation. The typical searcher carries a couple of expensive, lightweight flashlights, with extra batteries for 5-15 hour searches. The average price range of these flashlights cost between \$40-\$200 – but they are a small price to pay compared to their usefulness in finding a little boy lost in the cold night. These flashlights are designed for law enforcement and tactical operations. They typically have 10-30 times the lumen power of a standard Maglite and they are small and energy efficient.

Many spontaneous volunteers don't even bring a flashlight, or proper clothing - or they wear camouflage or black – which makes it very hard to determine if they are a searcher or a victim from the end of a search line. The gear list of a properly trained searcher is extensive and expensive and it is needed to be effective.

Do you have communications, a radio and can you properly use it? We often get helpful volunteers who request the use of a radio or they have a radio and they spend time trying to be helpful on the radio with their knowledge



and advice. Borrowing an expensive radio so you can talk to the command post is something you shouldn't ask us about. And if you don't have a radio, what do you do when you need help or find evidence or how do you generally communicate? Cell phones are difficult to use during an operation (for the command post and searchers) and unreliable. Trained members are typically licensed to use the radio and have training on how to properly use it.

Can you navigate with just a compass and map in unfamiliar terrain? Many think they can, but they can't. We have a test for the members of our team where you must navigate difficult terrain to find 6 wooden posts in the woods over 2.2 kilometers in two hours – AT NIGHT. Less than 50% of the personnel who take it the first time pass it. We do this test because if you are searching for a person lost in the woods, it is painfully obvious that you shouldn't become lost. You have to prove to us that you can do it.

But during every search with spontaneous volunteers, we are constantly dispatching trained personnel to gas stations, houses, campground offices and every place else to pick up spontaneous volunteers who are lost. Worse yet, we have to mobilize trained searches to go find lost volunteers. Add to this all the constant calls from volunteers who can't find their search location, or searchers who search the wrong location because they lack the map reading skills. As you can imagine this takes more time away from trained and experienced searchers. Time that could be used to find the missing subject.

Do you know the rules of Incident Command? Properly trained searchers spend a lot of time learning about the Incident Command System, National Incident Management System and a variety of other concepts that are used by first responders. What is operations, tactical deployment, staging, logistics, strike teams and many other terms that are used at an incident? These concepts help all the responding agencies – police, fire, forest service, search and rescue, DNR, EMS, FEMA – work together and become one unified search. If you aren't trained in it, you can't efficiently operate as a responder. Spontaneous Volunteers who aren't familiar with the concepts require more time, education and explanation on scene to get them working. This, of course, takes even more time from trained responders, when they should be doing their search duties.

There are many other reasons why untrained searchers are discouraged from participating in a search.

While we all know you want to help and we understand the overwhelming feeling of helplessness and frustration when you can't. Many of us made the decision to join a team, get the training and "pay the price". We respond to the missing child that rallies the community, but we also respond to the missing Alzheimer's patient, the missing person without a family, the loved and the forgotten. We give up our holidays, our weekends, family time and vacations to train and to respond to ALL calls. So before you criticize us, understand we do it for the same reason you want to help – but we have sacrificed to do it.

We encourage those who feel the need to help and sacrifice to join our team. If you can't join the team then take our training. We open much of our training like SAR Operations, Land Navigation, Survival and Improvisation, GPS operations and many other classes to the public. If you can't take the time to join the team, maybe you can join us for training. You would learn to be more effective and help us raise money for more training.

But, before you post your frustrations on Facebook, mock the "trained searcher" or grumble because you have to wait for hours in staging, remember the few points outlined above and let us do our job so others may be found.

Most important, if you respond, please join the search and the volunteer staging area. Please don't just head into the woods without properly joining the effort.

If you want to help, here is what you do:



BEFORE THE INCIDENT:

Attend a Search and Rescue Open House – we hold 4 a year

Donate to a Search and Rescue Team

Take our public training courses

WHEN THERE IS AN INCIDENT:

DO NOT go out and search on your own – go to the volunteer staging area

BE PATIENT – we understand the frustration – but for the reasons outlined above, it is important that we do everything according to standards and protocol

If you are asked by a searcher or law enforcement to do something, please comply. We have very good reasons to ask

Keep your eyes open, but don't go searching on your own – many missing are discovered by passer-bys who are not actively searching

Be positive – whether in the staging area or while on social media sites. Try not to second guess, criticize the family, speculate or encourage people “to go out and search on their own”

Keep posted on what is happening

Most important – thanks for wanted to help out. We encourage you to work with us, not against us.

Kent County Search and Rescue/Kent County Emergency Services Team, ©2013 All Rights Reserved

www.kentcountysar.org

Written by: Chuck Hayden, Deputy Director of Training, Kent County Search and Rescue. Deputy Director Hayden has completed the national certifications for SARTECH III, SARTECH II and SARTECH I/CREWLEADER. He is a nationally certified Evaluator for SARTECH Exams, Technical Rope Rescue Technician, Swiftwater Rescue Technician and a Wilderness First Responder. He also holds many other certifications. He has been in the Search and Rescue field for over 20 years, mostly as an unpaid professional. You can email Deputy Director Hayden at training@kentcountysar.org .

Kent County Search and Rescue/Kent County Emergency Services Team, ©2013 All Rights Reserved

www.kentcountysar.org