

TO: NORTH DAKOTA LEGISLATURE-69<sup>TH</sup> LEGISLATIVE SESSION  
RE: **TESTIMONY IN FAVOR OF SENATE BILL 2332**  
2/7/2025

Madam Chair Roers, Vice Chairman Castaneda, and committee members,

Good morning, my name is Travis Bateman and I represent the Badlands Search & Rescue (SAR) Service along with the Search and Rescue Volunteer Association of North Dakota (SARVAND). I submit to you this testimony in full support and **in favor** of Senate Bill 2332. Our two organizations are based out of Watford City and available to any agencies in the state to assist them. We have also provided assistance to eastern Montana agencies. Our team has 16 members residing across western North Dakota in Watford City, Bismarck, Dickinson, Minot and Williston at this time.

Badlands SAR was founded in 2018 and since then has developed a membership of knowledgeable volunteers trained in search and rescue skills such as incident management and support, ground search, lost person behavior, sign cutting, mantrailing, outdoor survival and safety, water operations-including side scan sonar, and unmanned aerial vehicles.

SARVAND was founded in 2023 as an organization to develop and establish state standards and training for North Dakota much along the same lines as what the North Dakota Firefighters Association does for the fire service.



Renee Arcand Search, Dawson County, MT on Yellowstone River – Searching flood debris.

Our members come from all backgrounds like any other volunteer organization. We are trained volunteers that aim to bring a skillset upon an incident so as to work towards an organized, unified, and active effort for the mission at hand. The difference with SAR incidents as compared to other emergencies is that often times, those needing help are well off any accessible roadway, they're in the water, out on the ice, and most critical....their true and exact location is unknown and they first have to be sought for and located in order to perform rescue or medical care. We do not charge for our services.

Our organizations are unique in the fact that we are not political subdivisions. We are entirely nonprofit and rely on donations and grants in order to survive. That in itself has proven to be a large challenge as it has never brought about any reliable, consistent, or steady stream of funding to operate.

Members also respond in their own vehicles, purchase their own fuel, packs, food, and other essentials to respond and operate. Members in past operations have also purchased fuel for our boats, food for the team, and even emergency repair costs to one of our boats during a mission as we did not have the funds on hand as an organization but our team was still there and ready to help and we were not going to be deterred by mechanical issues.



Dawson County, Montana Base Camp – Search for Renee Arcand on Yellowstone River.

We currently follow the standards and training set by the National Association for Search and Rescue (NASAR) and have also begun to adopt and develop training standards, to include certification, based off of models set by other states that have had true SAR programs in their respective areas for years or even decades. We have fundraised and held a week long SAR Conference for two years now to network and further advance our skills, invite and train with law enforcement agencies, and SAR personnel from across the nation. It is an immense task to host such an event but the benefits are absolutely priceless in terms of what is learned, gained, developed, and experienced.

All training and certification courses have a cost. There is the course and testing fees, and of course the travel, lodging, and meal expenses. Again, all of which fall on the individual volunteer member. While this has been accepted by most members, I can say that it has also kept us back from attaining certain skills as there comes a point where the price tag is simply too steep and we have no funding sources whatsoever to access from any government programs that exist as we are locked out for not being a government organization or political subdivision.

Senate Bill 2332 would certainly be a lifesaver for our organizations and what we are seeking to bring to the public safety field in North Dakota and in that, it will save lives by funding programs, training, equipment, and other needs that are currently not being met at any sustainable level.

I am also personally aware that many fire districts in our state are struggling with older equipment, or even outdated equipment. With the amount of technology and other advances available to today's emergency services, especially firefighters, sometimes that 1960 or 1970 model pickup used as a brush truck just doesn't cut it anymore when trucks of today are capable of having additional safety features, tech, and fire suppression gear equipped. The same can be said for larger apparatus, tenders, off-road vehicles, fire clothing, and radio communications. Even if a department has an older and still serviceable vehicle they wish to keep, there are always upgrades available but the cost is where the upgrade doesn't happen. LED lighting for scene illumination, thermal imagery, computer laptops to enhance mobile dispatch and information updates, mapping systems, and the list goes on.

Not to mention that many are starting to see their facilities reach or exceed their useful service life. Many fire stations were built in the 1970s or before and though maintained through the decades, there simply comes a time when new is needed. Fire trucks have grown larger, sometimes wider, and others longer. Just as tactics and techniques change over the years, so to do the needs of the facilities to house those newer age vehicles and gear.





National Night Out (public outreach) static display, Watford City, ND

Senate Bill 2332 would also create something in North Dakota that does not exist right now. A specific and dedicated funding source for volunteer emergency services and specifically for our volunteer response teams in fire/rescue, emergency medical services, and SAR. This is entirely doable and necessary in our organization's opinions, especially our's from the SAR side as we again, have no dedicated funding source whatsoever right now. I could give you a laundry list of what we need but I don't want any of you to require medical assistance here when you see the dollar signs and interrupt my podium time.

This is likely a large or no, this is an immense ask, but we believe it is doable with the funds that our state is generating with the Legacy Fund. The fund is about investments, right? To that I ask, is it ever a bad thing to invest in public safety? What is the price tag for a life saved or a community safeguarded with well trained, well equipped, and well prepared volunteers?

This legislature has a budget to adhere to every biennium and I understand that as of the end of January, the number of fiscal notes exceeds that in large form. However, in the coming weeks, you all will put your nose to the grindstone and grind away and by the end of this session, the dollars and funding will be devoted to this program and that program, this project and that one, this study and those agencies. And you all will go back to your respective areas of our state and continue on in your daily lives and occupations.



Lloyd Liken Search-Command Post-McCabe Church, Bismarck, ND

Much the same can be said for your volunteer emergency responder groups. Whether this fund comes to exist or not, they will still respond, train, and answer the calls that they do. Albeit, maybe a little less prepared as one might expect or a little less equipped. They may have to pool cash from their own crew to pay the insurance for that month, get the roof leak repaired, or purchase a computer program or app for them to operate more effectively, but they'll do it. And the Legacy Fund? Well, while those volunteers are pooling their personal funds together, that fund will keep on growing and growing and growing and be allocated in what ways are already determined, with plenty still remaining to help out us, the volunteer emergency responders.

So, I ask this of you today as we discuss this bill and you hear of needs and wants from the various programs, agencies, and walks of life through this session, again, what is the price today to you for a life saved or a community better safeguarded?

What is the price tag today to have a trained and certified search team available to spin up and deploy to search for a missing child or a missing elderly person in the dead of winter with mere hours to determine if that ends in a rescue, smiles, and joy....or a recovery, cries, and despair. For SAR incidents, that's how it truly is for these incident types right now. We need the help with funds. If we can get the funds, I can assure you all that our members will get the training, and gear, and we can further keep the grim reaper away. It's all about dollar signs and budgets here, we realize that. And those are tough choices to make.

But I can tell you as one that isn't in a state building in Bismarck wearing a suit and tie operating out of a climate-controlled office when incidents happen, whether its 30 below or 105 above outside that money is what handicaps us in the field trying to do the



work and see an incident through to the best outcome possible. It's the capable and willing boots on the ground that make it happen and we need the help with funding to be able to do so. The Legacy Fund has the monies and will continue to do so for the foreseeable future. It would be a very wise investment to provide some to your emergency volunteer response organizations.



Ground Team, Physical Agility Test, Little Missouri National Grasslands, ND

And I would be remiss if I didn't mention other public safety teams and agencies that could likely use a boost in necessary funds for much needed equipment and other needs to fulfill their mandates of public safety. Technology continues to advance and it makes tasks safer and more effective when those technologies are available and not hours away but there in house. Local budget constraints are a real challenge for many, especially those outside of the oil patch. This bill could greatly aid those outside the patch that don't receive GPT funds or have the necessary income from maxed out mill levies.



North Dakota public safety has a great deal of needs. Not wants. Needs. 2332 could certainly help solve many of those. From the basic patrol or response vehicle replacement to adequate body armor, radio communications, drones and robotics, training for specialties to enhance emergency responses to specific incident types, force multipliers such as police K9s, investigative and evidence gathering tools, and the list certainly goes on. And it doesn't matter if someone is working in an area with a population of 500 or 15,000. The fact is, criminals and their acts don't discriminate and they routinely cross through those small and large jurisdictions. The biggest difference is whether or not an agency has the means to interdict them or not and when they don't, the eventuality is those criminals eventually do become their problem, ready or not. 2332 would offer a solution to become ready by a proactive means, rather than reactive.



This legislative session has several bills that are of related topics and I wish to highlight them to you so as to help in furtherance of consideration of 2332, two are specific to SAR incident types and one is specific to recruitment and retention of emergency volunteer responders.



Renee Arcand Search, Dawson County, MT on Yellowstone River – Caving Bank Hazards



Those are:

HB1199 to establish a missing and murdered indigenous persons database and task force,  
HB1311 to request and fund a legislative study for the recruitment and retention of  
volunteer emergency responders and,  
HB1535 to establish a fourth missing person alert category for the public that is specific  
for missing and endangered indigenous persons, called a Feather Alert. North Dakota has  
three alerts currently, Amber, Silver, and Blue.

Please support organizations such as the two I represent but also those of our  
fellow emergency responders in fire/rescue and emergency medical services. For the sake  
of time here, to learn more about our organizations, please visit our website  
([badlandsSAR.org](http://badlandsSAR.org)) and you are more than welcome to reach out to me directly as well.

With that, I respectfully ask you for a Do Pass on 2332. Thank you for your  
attention, your services as legislators, your time here today and I stand for any questions.

Respectfully,

*/S/ Travis F. Bateman*  
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Missouri River Search for drowning victim utilizing boat and side scan sonar.