

January 15, 2024

Attention: Honourable Premier David Eby

**Re: Misuse of authority, bullying and other issues concerning government EMCR staff**

I am writing to alert you to significant issues, including bullying, threats, intimidation, and misuse of authority, involving the staff and leadership at Emergency Management and Climate Readiness (EMCR) in their conduct and behavior towards B.C.'s volunteer search and rescue community.

As the former and most recent CEO of the BC Search and Rescue Association (BCSARA), I have witnessed and experienced first-hand a number of interactions that, in addition to the charges above, include a high-level of disrespect for search and rescue volunteers as well as the blatant ignoring of pressing safety issues. To better explain, I would like to highlight a few of the issues I have encountered over the past four and a half years.

**1. EMCR ignored and did not disclose significant safety concerns found in a training audit.**

The board of BCSARA raised concerns about training standards for a specific capacity and asked EMCR to conduct an audit of all search and rescue (SAR) groups with this capability. This capability is used 200-300 times a year and has extreme consequences if not done correctly. EMCR agreed to conduct the audit.

For two years, the BCSARA board kept asking if the audit had been completed and was told it hadn't been done yet. Later, during a committee meeting, it was casually mentioned by someone else that, in fact, the audit was complete and that there were significant safety concerns found. Despite repeatedly asking for this information, it was hidden from the BCSARA board for years.

When EMCR staff were confronted, the response was not one of concern about the findings in the safety audit, which were not positive and required corrective action, but, instead, the concern was that BCSARA was now aware of the audit results. Instead of being concerned for the safety of SAR members and rescue subjects, the most pressing matter for EMCR was an effort to find out how BCSARA found out about the results.

Armed with this knowledge, BCSARA then asked the Joint Health and Safety Committee (joint between EMCR and BCSARA) to immediately address the concerns in the audit and work with BCSARA's Air Support Committee. EMCR agreed to do that. That was in May 2023, and, to this date, nothing has been done to address the safety concerns, despite BCSARA's efforts to have them rectified. This has serious implications for not only search and rescue volunteers but the subjects they are asked to save. EMCR has yet to release the audit to BCSARA.

**2. Disrespectful attitude to search and rescue volunteers.**

There is a systemic attitude of disrespect and institutionalized bullying of search and rescue volunteers. Many teams have experienced this as well as BCSARA staff and board members. There also appears to be a lack of any desire to act in good faith and in a collaborative manner. As an example, when a provincial operating guideline was issued without notice, BCSARA enquired why it hadn't been consulted. The response from the EMCR SAR director was, "I could have consulted with you, but it's not like we would have changed anything."

This attitude permeates from lower EMCR staff and continues right up to the assistant deputy minister's level. There is a contribution agreement between the Province and BCSARA and in it is a document call the "Framework." This was originally envisioned to be an agreement between EMCR and BCSARA on how to strategically move search and rescue in B.C. forward together. The original Framework included commitments by both organizations. BCSARA completed 100% of its commitments – more than 25 of them, while EMCR completed only one out of six commitments.

When it was time to renew the Framework, the assistant deputy minister removed all EMCR commitments and said, "It felt too much like the tail wagging the dog." This agreement was no longer a partnership with mutual responsibilities. This change allowed EMCR to treat BCSARA and its staff like paid consultants to the point that EMCR even demanded BCSARA staff report their hours. BCSARA is an independent non-profit organization representing the 3,400 SAR members in B.C.

In other examples, EMCR staff have often issued updates to provincial operating guidelines without consulting BCSARA, which is a violation of their own policies. In one case, EMCR signed a BCSARA co-chair's name to a document indicating he was involved in issuing it. He was not even aware of the document until after it was issued.

Most recently, EMCR issued a notice to the SAR community about a new rope rescue device indicating that the Joint Health and Safety Committee and the Joint Training Committee were involved. They were not. The two co-chairs of those committees were asked to attend a meeting with EMCR, however, the actual committees were never involved or consulted. This is against BCSARA policies and EMCR was aware of that.

The lack of meaningful consultation with BCSARA on this change has resulted in numerous questions from the SAR community, which could have been addressed had BCSARA been involved. BCSARA has the ability to bring subject matter experts to the table. EMCR staff often appear to go out of their way to not involve the BCSARA board regional directors and BCSARA staff which allows them to misuse their authority and circumvent any feedback or possible resistance to their intentions.

The recent "invitation" letter issued to the 78 ground search and rescue groups is another example of the systemic disrespect by EMCR staff towards SAR volunteers. The volunteers were instructed to sign a document within two weeks, or they would no longer be able to continue providing life saving services. No warning was given along with no thanks or recognition for the service they've provided for more than 50 years. The little feedback BCSARA was able to provide ahead of time was completely ignored by EMCR staff. Considering that these volunteers had no idea of what ramifications would come from signing and did not have enough time to discuss and review, it was obvious that EMCR expected mute obedience with no questions asked.

In an ultimate show of arrogance, there was also no apparent plan for the possibility that teams would not sign which would leave areas of the province and the public completely unprotected. When asked about this, EMCR simply replied that they would task other teams from other parts of the province as if these teams would leave their homes and families to travel long distances to another area without question – a notion that many teams said they would be unwilling to do. B.C. search and rescue is a volunteer service and members are not unpaid servants of the provincial government.

This is not how you treat or manage volunteers, especially those that provide the level of professional life saving service that search and rescue does. Given that these are volunteers, they can withdraw their services at any time if sufficiently provoked to do so.

The reaction from the SAR community to this disrespectful communication continues to this day. Thanks to the Official Opposition and media coverage, EMCR has been forced to provide two extensions despite telling BCSARA that it could not provide *any* extensions when BCSARA initially sought a six-month extension on behalf of all teams.

### **3. EMCR ignores advances in technology that could save lives today.**

EMCR has a long history of taking years to implement any new technology, even when it has already been approved federally. EMCR is known in the SAR community as the ministry of “no.” The first response from EMCR is always “no” rather than having an open mind to advances that may help in the search and rescue of subjects.

In past decades, all innovation and improvements have been driven by search and rescue members who are the subject matter experts. However, leadership and staff at EMCR have stated that they are not open to recommendations from the SAR community and will determine what interests EMCR and, only then, will they potentially seek any advice.

As an example, BCSARA has an advisory council called the British Columbia Ground Search and Rescue Advisory Council. It is made up of 12 very experienced SAR representatives, the RCMP and municipal police. EMCR was invited to be part of the advisory council but declined, stating they had their own priorities. Over the last six months, three recommendations from the council regarding life-saving technology were sent to EMCR. To date, BCSARA has not received any written response back. However, BCSARA’s president did receive a phone call complaining about BCSARA staff working on these life saving recommendations.

The technology this council recommended could easily be utilized in search and rescue today to save lives immediately, but EMCR continues to ignore or refuse to work with BCSARA to implement these new advances. Meanwhile, other jurisdictions outside of the province and federally have quickly adopted and implemented new technology. BCSARA’s technology recommendations included:

- a) **Video scanning software.** This software scans videos, normally taken from an aircraft or a drone and indicates unusual objects on the ground that might be worth further investigation. It has been available for years and, when BCSARA staff suggested we hold a webinar on it to educate the SAR community, EMCR sent a terse email stating we could not do that as it was not approved software. EMCR never indicated how to get it approved, nor will it work with BCSARA to approve it. Through BCSARA’s advisory council, a recommendation to adopt the software was made. EMCR never responded.
- b) **Use of drones.** BCSARA’s partner PEPAir has state of the art drones that have cameras that can zoom 200x, locate targets on the ground with GPS, have infrared capability and are licensed to go beyond line of sight. The SAR community is not able to access this resource directly and have had to develop a work around solution that removes EMCR and goes straight to the police and the Joint Rescue Coordination Center (JRCC), something that is highly unusual. RCMP have requested and used this technology for searches that members are tasked to, and this was the only way it could be deployed since EMCR refused to approve it. In fact, it was deployed just this past weekend to search for a downed aircraft.

- c) **Use of Artemis.** The best way to describe Artemis is that it is a device that turns a cell phone into a beacon. It is a federally regulated game changer for search and rescue. A subject with a cellphone (which most subjects carry) but in an area of no cell service can still be located using this device, which is installed in an aircraft and flown over the area the subject is thought to be in. Despite the subject being out of cellphone range, Artemis acts as a flying portable cell tower, allowing searchers to ping the subject's phone and discover their location. Knowing where the subject is dramatically reduces volunteer time to reach them and, if approved, could save lives instantly, especially in the back country where cell range is limited.

Given the importance of these options, BCSARA was forced to develop and circulate instructions to the SAR community with information about these capabilities and procedures on how to activate them (through the local police to the JRCC). This had to be done without EMCR's knowledge as they refused to work with BCSARA.

#### 4. **Bullying, intimidation, and threats.**

Since the announcement in 2019 of the alternative support model funding and EMCR's implementation of a director of SAR, a noticeable change in a tone of authority has come to permeate the previous collaborative relationship. A litany of stalled programs, ineffective policy, and an increasingly combative attitude towards volunteers by EMCR staff is well documented.

It is common for EMCR staff to threaten and intimidate BCSARA staff, committees, and board members as well as search and rescue volunteers. EMCR staff have often threatened to pull funding for search and rescue if minor things such as a report deadline might be missed, or if, in EMCR's staff opinion, a report is not complete.

BCSARA has never missed a deadline nor submitted an incomplete report and, yet it is often threatened with the removal of its funding. This is a particularly **reprehensible action** given that EMCR is interacting with an external non-profit organization representing 78 SAR groups who are especially vulnerable to any loss of funding given that they are drastically underfunded. Loss of this funding would also have a direct impact on public safety.

EMCR staff expect BCSARA staff to be extremely responsive, transparent, and accountable while they themselves let work lapse for months. This situation is so common that BCSARA staff have had to create a tracking system of work that is still sitting with EMCR. Some of that work goes back over a year, such as changes to provincial operating guidelines, which were approved by the joint committees, but continue to languish with EMCR. When asked for updates, EMCR staff become defensive and then complain to the president of the board.

EMCR staff regularly request work from BCSARA staff stating that the Treasury Board requires it, only to find out they never requested it. EMCR staff have often not been truthful when in discussions with BCSARA staff and volunteers. SAR groups have also shared that they have been "lied to" on a number of occasions.

#### 5. **Moratorium on new capabilities.**

Nearly three years ago, EMCR "announced" to the BCSARA board they were going to conduct a needs analysis of what was required in the form of capabilities for search and rescue in B.C. As such, there would be a moratorium on any new capabilities being approved. Just prior to this announcement, there was one application already submitted and waiting for approval. Despite having everything in order, it took EMCR more than a year to approve this one capability.

A capability is usually a technical rescue technique such as rope rescue, swift water rescue and avalanche rescue. Almost three years have passed since the announcement and no needs analysis has been conducted and the moratorium remains in place. EMCR estimates that another three years will be required to complete the needs analysis and lift the moratorium. Capabilities save lives. Imagine if your loved one died because government bureaucracy had not approved a SAR team to rescue in the conditions your loved one was in (such as at the bottom of a ravine where a rope rescue is required).

One SAR team in the north is requesting the addition of a canine search capability and has the support of the local police and municipality and, if approved, this would be the only search dog north of Kamloops. Once again, the moratorium was used as a reason to deny the request.

When this issue was raised before Christmas in the media and despite numerous documents using the term moratorium, EMCR staff changed the language to a “pause” in new capabilities. This attempt at spinning doctoring a key issue is disrespectful to the public and media and does not represent transparency or accountability which this government says it values.

To continue the theme of disrespect by EMCR towards SAR volunteers, EMCR made a presentation to the BCSARA board where they mentioned the needs analysis would be done in partnership with requesting agencies such as the RCMP and municipal police but excluded the search and rescue community.

Once again, SAR was not even considered or invited to be involved in that consultation, despite being the subject matter experts. I wrote a letter to EMCR about the oversight of involving SAR during the consultation. Once again, no written response was provided, although BCSARA was verbally told consultation to the SAR community would be done. There is still no needs analysis started.

#### **6. Sexist behavior by EMCR-approved trainers not taken seriously.**

EMCR received a complaint about the sexist behavior of a trainer who instructs at one of EMCR's well-known and approved training organizations. However, it wasn't until three complaints from three different female SAR volunteers who attended three different training events were received that EMCR finally reacted.

EMCR's first reaction was to consider changing how complaints were received so that **BCSARA would not be aware of them**. SAR volunteers should be able to attend any EMCR-approved training without fear of experiencing sexist comments and behaviors and it should not take three complaints before EMCR reacts.

### **Innovation has always been accomplished by the SAR community**

Search and rescue members have provided decades of life saving service to the people of B.C. Over time, the service has evolved and improved with every single advance occurring because of SAR volunteers. This list of volunteer-led improvements includes:

1. Helicopter long-line rescue
2. Helicopter night vision
3. Location software that was developed by a SAR volunteer that can grab GPS locations from a subject's cell phone when a text is sent to them.
4. SAR management software that was developed by a SAR volunteer and is widely used in B.C.

5. State of the art command vehicles
6. SAR management techniques

On average, 1,000 lives are saved every year and it is often said that search and rescue in B.C. is successful despite EMCR's involvement. In fact, in its current state, search and rescue would be better off without EMCR's involvement.

The B.C. provincial government relies on the goodwill of SAR volunteers and could not possibly afford a paid service which would cost \$189 million annually to achieve the same level of response that 3,400 volunteer SAR members deliver for free.

And, since traditional first responder services are stretched to breaking points, SAR members have also been filling that void, assisting with civil emergencies such as wildfires, floods, and landslides. They do this 24 hours a day, 7 days a week, 365 days a year, often leaving family, work and events to do so.

During 2023, SAR members delivered more than 10,000 evacuation notices, going door to door, and risking their own safety to ensure that residents knew to evacuate. Police forces have indicated they do not have the resources to do this themselves any longer. Clearly, this province needs search and rescue much more than search and rescue needs the province.

### **The road to tomorrow**

It is critical that the government act quickly to correct its relationship with the search and rescue community and respect this free life-saving service by engaging it in a professional and collegial manner that upholds the values of British Columbians and does not include bullying, intimidation, and threats.

To accomplish this, an audit of EMCR's conduct and practices is required to provide corrective action to a ministry that is known to abuse and degrade public partnerships and search and rescue relationships. This audit should include external experts and members of the SAR community.

Ideally, the Province should look to the New Zealand search and rescue model which gives their volunteers the authority over setting standards for search and rescue and does not leave this important function in the hands of provincial bureaucrats. It is a far safer and more efficient and responsive model. I would be happy to put you in touch with the director secretariat.

In addition to restoring a reputation of respect and meaningful consultation with the SAR community, it is recommended that some key EMCR staff be reassigned to other ministries and replaced by those with professional credentials, leadership skills and a consultative mindset.

Until this situation is corrected, both rescue subjects and SAR members are at risk as EMCR's practices directly and indirectly impact public and volunteer safety as well as the ability to respond to all types of calls for help. Advances in search and rescue techniques will also continue to be unnecessarily stalled for long time periods, if not years.

On behalf of the SAR community, I thank you for your consideration of this issue and please don't hesitate to reach out to myself or any one of the other SAR leaders listed below if you have questions or require further information.

Kind regards,

Dwight Yochim  
Former CEO of BCSARA  
[ddyochim@telus.net](mailto:ddyochim@telus.net)  
778-688-2295

Brad Sills, President  
Whistler SAR  
[bsills@telus.net](mailto:bsills@telus.net)  
604-932-7779

John Howe, SAR Manager (retired)  
Squamish SAR  
[jchfor@telus.net](mailto:jchfor@telus.net)  
604-220-5105

Andy Muma, President  
Houston SAR  
[muma.andy@gmail.com](mailto:muma.andy@gmail.com)  
250-845-2668

Paul Broen, President  
Fort St. James SAR  
[pbroen@telus.net](mailto:pbroen@telus.net)  
250-996-1060

Jordy Bouillet, Board Member and SAR Manager  
Prince Rupert SAR  
[Jordyb70@gmail.com](mailto:Jordyb70@gmail.com)  
250-600-0485

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