

Modernizing Ground Search and Rescue in Nova Scotia: A Path Forward

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This document is intended as a discussion paper that reflects what was heard through engagement with Ground Search and Rescue (GSAR) teams, the Nova Scotia Ground Search and Rescue Association (NSGSARA/GSARA), municipalities, policing partners, and emergency management organizations.

Rather than presenting fixed recommendations, this report captures shared perspectives on pressures within the current system and identifies areas where participants indicated that change, collaboration, or investment would improve the effectiveness and sustainability of GSAR in Nova Scotia.

The actions described throughout are best understood as a potential path forward—one that would require continued collaboration, shared leadership, and joint decision-making among all partners.

FINDINGS

Nova Scotia's GSAR system is an essential component of the province's public-safety network, including municipal and provincial emergency response systems. More than 1,200 trained volunteers across 23 community-based teams respond to hundreds of incidents each year, including missing-person searches, storm response, evacuations, wellness checks, and other civil-emergency tasks. Collectively, GSAR volunteers contribute over half a million hours annually to search operations, civil emergencies, training, and public education.

GSAR teams are activated by the Royal Canadian Mounted Police (RCMP), municipal police, and, for civil emergencies, by the Department of Emergency Management (DEM) and Regional Emergency Management Organizations (REMOs). Under the *Emergency Management Act* and the *Emergency Preparedness and Nova Scotia Guard Act*, municipalities have primary responsibility for emergency management at the local level and rely on a range of emergency response assets—including GSAR teams—to support preparedness, response, and recovery activities.

GSAR team experience, dedication, deep local knowledge and professionalism make them one of Nova Scotia's most capable and cost-effective emergency services. Yet, GSAR teams and supporting partners indicate the system faces growing pressures: unclear governance, inconsistent funding, uneven access to training and technology, and a growing burden on volunteers who shoulder complex operational and administrative responsibilities.

On behalf of the Province of Nova Scotia, DEM, in consultation with the Department of Justice, initiated this review to clarify roles and responsibilities and strengthen consistency and accountability. The review also identifies sustainable approaches to modernizing GSAR, reducing risk, and ensuring efficient use of resources in line with municipal and provincial mandates. Engagement with 21 GSAR teams, the Nova Scotia Ground Search and Rescue Association (NSGSARA), policing organizations, the Halifax Regional Municipality, and emergency-management partners highlighted six interrelated areas requiring coordinated action to support modernization.

As will become clear throughout this report, any movement toward modernization depends on shared responsibility. The recommendations in this report outline policy, funding, and operational decisions and actions requiring shared leadership and responsibility across provincial and municipal partners, RCMP and municipal police, and the volunteer GSAR community.

Key Themes

Nova Scotia benefits from a dedicated and capable GSAR system. Volunteers demonstrate professionalism, resilience, and a strong commitment to their communities. Teams report effective search capability, collaboration across jurisdictions, and a shared commitment to continuous improvement. Many have also developed strong local partnerships that support both search operations and a growing range of civil-emergency activities.

At the same time, participants consistently noted that existing structures and supports have not fully kept pace with the expanding scope and complexity of GSAR operations. The key findings that follow reflect areas where modernization and clearer structures would greatly assist to sustain and empower GSAR for the future.

- **Governance arrangements vary across the system.** Many of the systems that exist to support GSAR teams (e.g., standards, provincial leadership and coordination, funding), are informal and lacking in clarity on roles, accountability, and authority. As GSAR's role expands within Nova Scotia's integrated Emergency Management model, a comprehensive governance model is needed to strengthen provincial and association (NSGSARA) leadership and the engagement of key partners such as municipalities and the RCMP.
- **Municipal reliance on GSAR is increasing.** As municipalities fulfill their legislated emergency management responsibilities, GSAR teams are increasingly relied upon to support local preparedness, response, and recovery activities. However, levels of municipal integration, funding, and formalized arrangements vary significantly across the province.
- **Funding is inconsistent and inadequate.** Teams operate with modest budgets that vary widely by community. Provincial and municipal funding falls short of operational demand, leaving volunteers to invest substantial personal time and resources.
- **Training, technology and equipment standards are incomplete and unenforced.** A training and standards framework is needed to ensure all teams can meet consistent expectations, integrate effectively with police and emergency-management partners, and maintain safe, interoperable operations provincially.
- **Critical technology and communications systems require modernization.** RTT radios, mapping platforms, and other systems are at end of life or lack interoperability with RCMP, DEM, and municipal partners.
- **Volunteer sustainability presents an emerging risk.** Aging membership, high administrative load, and out-of-pocket costs are creating barriers to recruitment and retention.
- **Operational frameworks are outdated.** The 1994 MOU, municipal arrangements, and activation protocols (particularly for remote rescues) need updating to current realities and emerging demands.

The options presented for consideration in this report are intended to support informed decision-making and coordinated action by provincial and municipal governments, policing partners, and the volunteer GSAR community. Taken together, they provide a foundation for strengthening consistency, accountability, sustainability, and resilience within Nova Scotia's GSAR system, while respecting its volunteer-based nature and its evolving role within the province's emergency management framework.

The Path Forward

The path forward for GSAR modernization in Nova Scotia is not defined by a single set of actions, but by a commitment to continued collaboration among partners. What we heard throughout this engagement points to the need for a more coordinated, transparent, and sustainable approach—one that reflects the shared responsibilities of the Province, municipalities, policing partners, GSAR teams and GSARA. Based on engagement findings and jurisdictional insights, this report outlines a coordinated set of recommendations for consideration, organized around six themes. Together, they present options to strengthen and sustain GSAR as a modern, reliable and integrated part of Nova Scotia’s emergency-management system.

1. Governance and Leadership

- A provincial governance and accountability framework supporting shared provincial and municipal leadership, strengthening provincial coordination capacity, clarifying roles within emergency management, and reinforcing GSAR’s role as an integrated volunteer emergency service provider supporting municipal and provincial emergency responsibilities.

2. Funding and Sustainability

- Predictable multi-year funding approaches shared between the Province and municipalities, alongside modernization of funding tools and support for regional collaboration and shared infrastructure investments. Shared funding should consider municipal emergency management responsibilities and GSAR’s role in supporting local response capacity.

3. Training and Standards

- Provincial service, training, technology and equipment standards, supported by a coordinated training framework and instructor network strengthening consistency among GSAR Teams and interoperability with municipal and provincial emergency management systems.

4. Technology and Interoperability

- A coordinated approach to technology modernization to replace RTT radio, mapping and other critical at-risk systems along with ongoing technology refreshes and maintenance and improved connectivity via satellite for field operations.

5. Volunteer Recruitment and Retention

- Reduced volunteer burden through increased funding for PPE and training and by streamlining administrative processes and enhancing mental health supports.

6. Interoperability and Activation

- Modernized agreements and formalized partnerships. Broaden activation pathways for remote rescues. Standardize command, mutual aid, and multi-team operations and strengthen integration with regional operations.

What We Heard

Participants consistently emphasized that strengthening GSAR will depend on coordinated action across partners. The items outlined below reflect what we heard would make the greatest difference to GSAR effectiveness, sustainability, and integration within the broader emergency management system.

These are not prescriptive recommendations, but areas for further discussion, prioritization, and collaborative action.

Governance and Leadership

1. Establish a Formal Governance Framework

Participants consistently identified the need for a clearer and more formalized governance framework. What we heard suggests that strengthening governance could include:

- Clarifying roles and responsibilities across the Province, municipalities, GSARA, and GSAR teams
- Creating or strengthening a provincial forum or committee to support coordination and transparency

There was also strong feedback that GSARA could play a more defined leadership and coordination role within a formal governance model.

2. NSGRA Structures and Capacity

NSGARA updates including by-law and committee arrangements, priority setting, member engagement, and more. They should also consider establishing a full-time program director role and a training coordinator role.

3. Municipal Governance, Alignment, and Integration

Municipal engagement supports effective coordination of GSAR. Municipalities should recognize GSAR as a part of their emergency-service network, integrate GSAR into their emergency management plans, and update agreements and activation protocols to clarify expectations.

4. Reactivate and Empower the Provincial GSAR Committee

Reactivate and empower the provincial GSAR committee by: reviewing and updating committee membership, resuming regular meetings, and introducing consistent reporting and communications practices to promote transparency.

5. Modernize and Formalize Partnerships

Modernize and formalize partnerships by: replacing existing 1994 NSEMO-NSGAR-RCMP memorandum with a modern services agreement between DEM-GSAR team and encouraging the RCMP to implement a memorandum of understanding with GSAR teams.

6. Roles and Relationships within the Emergency Management System

Clarify GSAR's role within municipal and provincial emergency management structures to promote effective collaboration, and clarify the roles, activation criteria and protocols of the Nova Scotia Guard.

7. Communication and Collaboration

Communication and collaboration could be improved by encouraging participation in joint exercises, meetings and debriefs with GSAR partners.

Funding and Sustainability

8. Predictable Multi-Year Core Funding, Shared with Municipalities

GSAR can achieve financial stability by increasing provincial funding going specifically towards operational costs to reduce reliance on fundraising. Opportunities for cost-effectiveness such as provincial insurance for GSAR assets are also encouraged.

9. Emergency Services Provider Fund

Emergency Services Provider Fund; targeted and flexible funding mechanisms to reflect GSAR-specific needs including training and technological improvements.

10. Expense Claim Reporting

Expense claim reporting could be improved by developing a more standardized expense claims process, promoting consistency and accuracy.

11. Regional Collaboration and Shared Infrastructure

Regional collaboration and shared infrastructure can support equitable access to specialized resources and strengthen regional capacity. This can include: supporting standardized GSAR incident command resources, developing regional equipment caches, and using regionalization incentive grants to encourage facilities and equipment sharing.

12. Financial Support to Reduce Volunteer Costs

To lessen the financial cost for GSAR volunteers, the province can consider: covering the costs of standardized PPE and training, adjustments to the volunteer tax credit, and exploring options for stipends or wage-replacement mechanisms.

13. Federal Partnerships

Federal partnerships could assist GSAR operations by advocating for the inclusion of GSAR within federal emergency management funding programs and use other federal funding sources such as the Search and Rescue New Initiatives Fund (SARNIF).

Training and Standards

14. Provincial Standards

Clear and consistent provincial standards support GSAR service delivery. The province should work to develop standards in areas that lack them, including establishing base capabilities, training, equipment, and technology standards.

15. Provincial Training Framework and Instructor Network

To streamline GSAR training, curricula must be standardized, 'train-the trainer' models could be implemented, partnerships with post-secondary institutions to expand instructor capacity, developing a provincially accessible training calendar, supporting centralized tracking related to training participation and completion, and identifying emerging training needs.

16. Accessible and Modular Training Delivery

Standardizing the delivery of core training programs allows for consistency across GSAR teams. Standardized training can also be flexibly delivered (some virtual, some in-person) to increase volunteer participation.

17. Training Costs

Consistent funding for training instead of needs-based funding keeps training costs down, and promotes the consistent skill development, safety, and readiness of GSAR teams.

18. Leadership and Search Manager Development

GSAR teams are only as effective as their leaders. The province should explore leadership development, shadowing, and mentorship opportunities including administrative and governance-related training for GSAR team executives. Defining the roles within Incident Command and supporting delivery of ICS 200, ICS 300 and provincial mock exercises are encouraged to strengthen GSAR leadership capacity.

19. Safety and Wellness Training

Consistent safety and wellness training protects volunteers, ensures operational effectiveness and promotes risk management across GSAR activities. Expanded access to Safety Officer training and review of Safety Manual Guidelines are encouraged.

Technology and Interoperability

20. Modernize and Standardize Core Systems

Modernize and standardize: GSAR radio fleet, integrate mapping and communications technologies, replace existing incident management system, implement consistent cybersecurity, and mandate the use of common tools and platforms.

21. Technology Refresh and Maintenance Approach

Regular technology refresh and maintenance using shared funding.

22. Connectivity Solutions

Reliable connectivity is essential to effective field operations, therefore funding satellite internet solutions in low-coverage areas and exploring additional technology solutions is recommended.

23. Technology Training and Technical Assistance

To use and integrate modern technology into GSAR efforts, technological proficiency should be covered in provincial training frameworks, and mechanisms for technical support should be explored.

Volunteer Recruitment and Retention

24. Volunteer Workload

Streamline the administrative process to support volunteer sustainability. This could include: consolidating administrative processes, simplifying Criminal Record Check requirements, encouraging partners to provide updated contact information to NSGSARA, and developing standardized 'how-to' guides for common administrative tasks.

25. Employer Engagement and Policy Change

Employer partnership initiatives such as emergency leave policies, incentive programs, or recognition measures can enable volunteers to respond to emergencies during work hours.

26. Mental Health and Peer Support

Supporting access to critical incident stress management services and integrating mental health and resilience into training models will ensure the wellbeing of GSAR volunteers.

27. Recruitment and Retention Initiatives

Targeted recruitment efforts can be used to support long-term sustainability and diversity of the GSAR volunteer workforce. This can be achieved by: promoting GSAR on social media and at community events, align GSAR recruitment and promotion activities with the Nova Scotia guard or other emergency service providers, and integrating GSAR volunteers into inter-agency training.

Interoperability and Activation

28. Activation Authority for Remote Rescue and Other Calls

Timely activation can be supported by: exploring Fire Services' and EHS' role in initiating GSAR activation, clarifying policy and funding frameworks, work with 911 administrators to align dispatch and triage with wilderness and remote-area conditions, and encouraging joint training and communication among GSAR and auxiliary agencies.

29. Command and Mutual Aid Frameworks

Consistent command structures and mutual-aid agreements support effective coordination during GSAR operations.

30. Coordination and interoperability

Coordination and information sharing, and joint-training exercises amongst GSAR and emergency response partners will ensure effective collaboration.

31. Specialized Initiatives and Programs

Targeted initiatives to create specialized programs include: a one-time funding option for up-front costs, reduce financial barriers for families, and supporting coordinated promotion and awareness efforts.

32. Cross-Border and Regional Collaboration

Cross-border and regional collaboration support operational flexibility. Eg; create a mutual aid understanding with New Brunswick

NS GSAR Modernization: Action Plan

