

## Letter to the Editor

### Search and Rescue Coordination: An Emerging Profession

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If you were to assign a letter grade to humanity for its efforts in aiding people in distress, what would it be? Few would dispute that all people and nations have a fundamental moral obligation to assist those in need. Additionally, countries have an internationally recognized duty to provide search and rescue (SAR) services and to ensure coordinated planning for those services. Unfortunately, according to the International Civil Aviation Organization (ICAO), SAR “continues to represent the major challenge for States when performing their safety oversight function. The overall EI [Effective Implementation] ... is below 50 percent”<sup>1</sup> (emphasis added). From a global standpoint, we are failing.

Furthermore, the ICAO data reveal significant deficiencies: 54% of nations lack regular training for their SAR coordinators, 61% operate rescue coordination centers that are inadequately staffed, and 67% fail to coordinate SAR efforts with neighboring countries. Consequently, even in the world's most advanced nations, 81%<sup>2</sup> of "person in water" incidents fail to result in a life saved. This alarming statistic suggests that an individual who goes overboard and requires SAR intervention faces a mere 19% probability of survival.

The core challenge is that the most vital component of global SAR programs—coordination—remains critically underdeveloped and underresourced. SAR coordination is the essential, frequently overlooked function responsible for receiving distress alerts, analyzing complex information, conducting investigations, formulating detailed search plans, and orchestrating disparate resources that often possess widely varying capabilities and are subject to distinct jurisdictional controls. Despite its role as a single point of failure for the world's life-saving enterprise, it has lagged behind analogous public safety sectors, such as fire and law enforcement.

While SAR coordination has progressed, it largely remains unprofessionalized. Professionalization can be defined as an evolutionary process by which self-directed work gradually transitions into work that supports larger organizations and serves the public interest. Fields that successfully navigate this evolution are typically characterized by: universal duty of care, specialized knowledge and skills, protracted, standardized training based on accepted criteria, and a robust, unique body of knowledge derived from theoretical and empirical research. To be clear, professionalization has nothing to do with an individual's dedication or even their status as a paid employee or volunteer, but the maturity of the field writ large.

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<sup>1</sup> ICAO Universal Safety Oversight Programme, Triennial Report 2022-2024, page , page 36. <https://www.icao.int/usoap>

<sup>2</sup> Derived from US Coast Guard data spanning 2013-2023, released via FOIA in 2023.

Although standards exist for individuals and organizations involved in SAR coordination, such as those detailed in the IAMSAR Manuals, their implementation varies across organizations and national authorities. Unlike other public safety professions, such as emergency management and law enforcement, SAR coordination has lacked an independent certifying body or association to uphold accepted standards, advocate for the profession as a whole, and advance its collective body of knowledge. This deficit in professionalization directly compromises SAR effectiveness globally.

The watershed moment in a field's evolution is the establishment of a qualifying association—a body comprising the field's leading experts, unified to increase professional conformity, enhance the status of its members, and engage in research to advance the profession. The emergence of such an association is both necessary and inevitable. Presently, no recognized profession operates without the support of at least one such association.

The primary function of these associations is to provide a mechanism for validating that an individual practitioner has achieved a particular level of knowledge and skill in the field, a process generally known as certification. This process constitutes a formal attestation by an independent body that a practitioner has attained a level of competence that satisfies the underlying standards.

The International Association of Search and Rescue Coordinators (IASARC) was founded to promote the sustained professionalization of search and rescue coordination globally. This international professional association is composed of leading subject-matter experts from SAR organizations and the scientific community, united by the shared mission to fully professionalize SAR coordination through challenging professional certifications, advocacy for improved legal, regulatory, and policy frameworks, and scientific and technological advancement.

IASARC is spearheading a landmark global initiative to establish the world's inaugural ISO-compliant certification for SAR coordinators. By convening multinational committees of preeminent SAR experts, IASARC is developing a rigorous, competency-based program that will standardize training, assessment, and professionalism across international borders and in all domains: land, maritime, and aeronautical. This endeavor will strengthen global interoperability, enhance decision-making in high-risk operations, and elevate the profession through transparent governance, impartial evaluation, and robust quality assurance.

### **Call to Action**

SAR coordination achieves its maximum efficacy when all participating organizations, responders, and partners adhere to uniform standards, share a common objective, and commit to cooperation. We are currently presented with a pivotal opportunity—and a corresponding professional obligation—to elevate the standards of professionalism within our domain.

We must forge a cohesive unity across agencies, international boundaries, diverse disciplines, and distinct cultures to establish a common bedrock of training, accreditation, and exemplary operational procedures. By harmonizing our collective capabilities and raising our benchmarks, we are able to ensure more rapid deployment, safer operational environments, and superior outcomes for those relying on us during their gravest emergencies.

The present moment necessitates a concerted effort to convene, collaborate, and formalize the professionalization of SAR coordination to ensure that every mission is executed with paramount

excellence, thereby maximizing the probability of survival for every life in jeopardy.

SAR coordination stands at a critical juncture. The path forward requires a decision: to persist within an inconsistent, underrecognized framework, or to elevate SAR coordination into a fully professionalized, scientifically advanced discipline. The imperative for change is unequivocal - join the IASARC mission.

### **The IASARC Vision**

A vision drives the International Association for Search and Rescue Coordinators (IASARC): to ensure that every life in distress that can be saved is saved. This moral imperative to save lives transcends all national, political, governmental, and industrial boundaries. Achieving this requires incident response coordination by exceptionally skilled professionals who utilize the most advanced technological capabilities.

The endeavor of saving lives cannot be finitely quantified; life is of infinite value. Therefore, the commitment to this mission must advance and improve without limit. We must act decisively now. Regardless of how excellent a nation's current Search and Rescue (SAR) system may be, the continuous ability to render aid in all environments demands that SAR professionals remain ever vigilant and the organizations supporting them constantly enhance their systems. Our guiding principle is "Amplio Infinite - Improve Infinitely."

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