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APPALACHIAN SEARCH AND RESCUE CONFERENCE  
P.O. Box 440 Newcomb Station  
Charlottesville, VA 22903

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Reply To:  
Keith Conover, M.D.  
36 Robinhood Road  
Pittsburgh, PA 15220-3014  
412-561-3413

January 11, 1989

TO: Cady Soukup, ASRC Chairman  
FROM: Keith Conover, M.D., Board member  
SUBJECT: Training Standards

Why am I writing this letter? Because I feel that getting our training standards into shape is the most important task facing the ASRC right now.

We revised our Bylaws to reflect the changes in ASRC membership structure that we agreed on a year ago. Now, we must revise our training standards to correspond to the new Bylaws. We must do so promptly, because, at least in AMRG, our recruiting and training are hamstrung by the lack of standards. The standards have been "in transition" since we formed our Group.

On the other hand, we must not be precipitate about setting standards; after this long, a few more weeks won't make a lot of difference. We must have standards that are good, standards that are workable, and above all, standards the members believe in and are willing to meet.

Why am I writing this letter? Because I wasn't able to come to the last Board meeting. And, I want to expose you and others to my most strongly-held ideas, so that you may consider them before we meet to discuss the training standards.

Why am I writing this letter? Because the ASRC training standards are important not only to the ASRC. The Virginia GSAR standards were patterned after the ASRC's. MRA teams tell me they have a high opinion of the ASRC standards, and hope to emulate them. Norm Sloane, a lawyer with Kentucky Emergency Services, gives a talk on search and rescue liability at each NASAR conference. He makes a point of citing the ASRC Training Standards as an excellent way to minimize SAR liability exposure.

Why am I writing this letter? Because I wrote most of the first three editions of ASRC training standards. Because I wrote the first GSAR standards. And, because I've thought about standards a lot

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since then. (If for no other reason, because I'm chairman of the ASTM task group on SAR personnel assessment.) I want to share these thoughts with you. Please, read the rest of the letter, and let these ideas percolate in the back of your mind until the standards meeting. Thanks.

1. Our standards must serve multiple purposes:

1.1. Anyone we send into the field must be in no danger. I'm not really worried too much about observers/uncertified members/whatever, as long as someone competent is babysitting (oops, I mean leading the team). But, anyone we certify as a Field Team Member should be able to take care of his or her own safety.

1.2. Our standards provide uniformity. so that teams 400 miles apart can work together smoothly. (More smoothly than MRA teams.) We must have a common base of knowledge and skills. Members must also respect the standards enough that we are willing to trust any certified member's belay.

1.3. Our standards help represent us to the search and rescue community. And, our standards must meet or exceed those of the states in which we work. In particular, our Field Team Members must meet the Virginia GSAR Level I standards, and our Field Team Leaders must meet the Virginia GSAR Level II standards. (For your information, I've enclosed a copy).

1.4. Our standards provide a goal for new members. This may seem trivial to us old-timers, but I assure you that new members find the standards important.

2. We have pioneered the use of explicit, testable standards of performance in search and rescue. Let's not back off now. The nebulous MRA standards are OK for a loose association of disparate teams. But, to have the tight-knit ASRC that is our ideal, we need standards that have some meat on them.

3. The minimum standard for participation in the field should not be in the training standards. The Operations Manual specifies that members who participate in field activities must have certain minimum equipment. If we simply require that uncertified members participate only under close supervision of a certified member, we (a) allow anyone who seems competent to go in the field, (b) avoid liability, and (c) keep from diluting good standards. What will make people want to get certified if we do this? Peer pressure, and a desire to measure oneself against a respected standard.

4. Our standards must be testable, but don't need to be a test. The idea of testing someone on every single skill needed for search and rescue ASRC is comical-- we'd spend all our time testing and none of our time searching. Any testing we do should be based on our standards, though, including all those items that are essential and a smattering of the others.

5. We say that we specialize in wilderness search and rescue and mountain rescue. Our standard should reflect this chosen speciality. And, we must align our standards not only with what we do routinely, but with what mountain/wilderness search and rescue teams might reasonably be asked to do.

6. Our standards will be read far and wide. Let's use good grammar and syntax, spell everything right, and use consistent form and style without awkwardness or ambiguity. Have one person, with a good spell-checker, a good syntax/style-checker, and some editorial experience, clean up the standards before they are presented to the Board.

By the way, in your letter, you quoted my comments, and you had me saying Pennsylvania GSAR standards rather than the Virginia GSAR standards that I meant to say. As far as other people's comments: Search Communications-- no opinion. Age-- no opinion. Have branching into separate field and base "tracks"-- basically agree, but don't hold strong opinion. Set aside medical standards for now-- agree, but think we should specify which medical "levels" we plan to establish and charge the Medical Committee with working on them.

encl: Virginia GSAR standards excerpt

cc: Group main addresses Gene Harrison

Peter McCabe

Dorothoy Antis

Deming Herbert

Gary Mechtel

Sheila Armstrong

Patsy Humphris

Kevin Parkes

Ricardo Bennett

Chris Ingle

Mark Pennington

Dave Carter

Bob Koester

Carl Solomon

Art Dodds

Mike Kuga

Ralph Wilfong

Bob Elron

Le Ligon

Lorick Fox

Todd L'Herrou