

**COMMONWEALTH OF VIRGINIA
DEPARTMENT OF EMERGENCY SERVICES
SEARCH AND RESCUE PROGRAM**

STANDARDS FOR EQUINE SEARCH TEAMS

I. SCOPE

- A. These standards are intended to define the minimum qualifications expected of a mounted search team.
- B. The certification issued under this standard is a requirement only for those personnel who wish to voluntarily participate in the search and rescue program of the Department of Emergency Services at the level indicated in the standard.
- C. The Equestrian search team should be able to perform the following functions in the general environment of the Commonwealth of Virginia:
 - 1. Search for missing persons in wilderness, rural and suburban areas.
 - 2. Assist in supply of other search teams.
 - 3. Assist in evacuation of the subject where mounted evacuation would be appropriate.
 - 4. Assist with evaluation, organization and investigation of missing person incidents.
- D. The team should be capable of performing these functions anytime of the year, day or night, and in all weather conditions experienced in the Commonwealth. The team may work with a variety of individuals and organizations, including law enforcement, fire and rescue, casual volunteers and family members of the missing subject(s). In order to do this, the handler should be able to:
 - 1. Understand the search and rescue system used in the Commonwealth.
 - 2. Understand the theory and practice of a missing person search.
 - 3. Plan, execute, debrief and document a variety of search tasks.
 - 4. Navigate accurately on land.
 - 5. Survive an unexpected wilderness emergency.
- E. Equine requirements
 - 1. These standards do not address any particular breed, size, or sex of the equine family. However, it is important the animal have the stamina for long hours of work under varied conditions of terrain and weather.
 - 2. The animal must be sociable and controllable in situations involving crowds, noise, traffic, other horses, dogs or other domestic animals and other distractions encountered.

II. TERMINOLOGY

- A. The definitions listed here are for the purposes of these standards only. They may or may not reflect other definitions used by other groups, individuals or organizations.
1. **Aggressive Horse Behavior** - Biting, lunging, kicking or striking out at people or other animals.
 2. **Area Search** - Search of a specific geographical area. The area could be urban, suburban, rural or wilderness.
 3. **Equine** - Any member of the equine family, being any breed of horse, mule, donkey, etc.
 4. **Equine Search Team** - The combination of a certified equine and certified handler, for the purposes of performing search and rescue.
 5. **Handler** - The person who is controlling the horse while either on foot or by riding. The person need not own the horse, but is required to have taken the horse through the test included in this standard.
 6. **Horse** - Any member of the equine family.
 7. **Horse Team** - One handler with one horse.
 8. **Mounted** - The act of riding a horse while in the performance of the duties of search and rescue. Being on horseback.
 9. **Ponied** - The act of leading a horse at the end of a lead line by a mounted horse team.
 10. **Rural** - Country often given to farming or to woodland and sparsely to moderately populated.
 11. **SAR Equine Standards Committee** - A committee of representatives of each mounted unit that has an M.O.U. with the Virginia Department of Emergency Services. Each mounted unit may have up to two voting members on the committee. The Virginia Department of Emergency Services may also appoint a member to the committee.
 12. **Suburban** - Moderately to heavily populated areas given primarily to business and residential development.
 13. **Wilderness** - An area generally uncultivated and uninhabited, and often inaccessible by road.

III. HANDLER KNOWLEDGE AND PERFORMANCE EXPECTATIONS

The handler will demonstrate an understanding of the items listed under each subject and the ability to perform the skills listed. Specific tests designed for this purpose are described in Section V. TEST METHODS, and are included as part of these standards.

A. SAR Operations

1. Describe how state missions are originated.
2. List several resources that might be utilized during a SAR event.
3. Identify the major staff functions of the I.C.S. System.
4. Demonstrate the ability to develop basic horse team assignments for a search incident and provide appropriate recommendations for additional resource support to the incident.
5. Define the functions of these field team positions.
 - a. Field Team Member
 - b. Field Team Leader
 - c. Field Team Sign-cutter
 - d. Medical Specialist
 - e. Rescue Specialist
 - f. Radio Operator
 - g. Navigator
6. Describe proper searcher conduct as it relates to law enforcement, the family of missing subject(s) and the media.
7. Describe general safety considerations in SAR operations, including dealing with critical incident stress.
8. Demonstrate an understanding of the provisions of the Virginia Search and Rescue Council "Standard Operating Procedures."

B. Legal Aspects of Search and Rescue

1. Describe SAR responsibilities at the state level.
2. Identify the limitations of the "Good Samaritan law."
3. Define several factors necessary to prove negligence.
4. Describe several methods of reducing liability exposure.
5. Describe the circumstances when entry upon private property may be justified.

C. Personal Equipment

1. Explain the basic principals of clothing and equipment selection for the search environment.
2. Demonstrate possession of adequate personal equipment for the search environment. (See APPENDIX A for guidelines for minimum suggested and required personal equipment list.)

D. Wilderness Travel

1. Describe several problems commonly encountered on SAR missions that lead to a survival situation.
2. Describe the body's physiologic response to cold, heat and psychological stress.
3. Define the following environmentally-related problems and their recognition, treatment and prevention:
 - a. Hypothermia
 - b. Hyperthermia
 - c. Frostbite
 - d. Dehydration
4. Demonstrate the ability to bivouac overnight in the out-of-doors. See APPENDIX B for guidelines for an overnight bivouac.

E. Land Navigation

1. Define the following terms or concepts:
 - a. True north and magnetic north
 - b. Declination
2. Demonstrate the ability to read and interpret topographic map border information, colors and symbols.
3. Demonstrate the ability to use a compass to plot a course on a map.
4. Demonstrate the ability to use the following plotting methods to determine the coordinates of a given point.
 - a. U.T.M.
 - b. A.S.R.C.
 - c. Ungridded map
5. Demonstrate the ability to perform the following navigational functions:
 - a. Obtain and follow a simple compass bearing
 - b. Determine a reciprocal
 - c. Move around obstacles
 - d. Measure distance by pacing
 - e. Determine position by terrain feature identification
 - f. Determine position by triangulation
6. Describe how to use these land navigation concepts:
 - a. Catching features
 - b. Collection features
 - c. Attack points
 - d. Aiming off

F. Search Skills

1. Demonstrate an understanding of these search tactics:
 - a. Attraction
 - b. Containment
 - c. Contour search
 - d. Hasty search
 - e. Sweep search (Open grid search)
 - f. Line search (Closed grid search)
 - g. Sign cutting
 - h. Interviewing
 - i. Ridges/Drainages
 - j. Corridor search
2. Describe procedures for working with ground teams and signcutters.
3. Given a search task, discuss and demonstrate the ability to plan the task considering weather conditions, visibility, terrain characteristics and desired POD.
4. Demonstrate the ability to perform the task planned above.
5. Demonstrate the ability to translate field activity onto a topographic map, including route taken, areas searched and not searched, clues located, times for all of the above and estimated POD for the task.
6. Demonstrate the ability to accurately debrief the task, providing the debriefer all of the information listed in number five (5) of this section.

G. Clue and Site Procedures

1. Describe the proper approach to a site containing clues or a subject.
2. Describe methods to preserve clues and to secure a site.
3. Explain the importance of accurate documentation of clues and of subject's location.

H. Helicopter Operations

1. Describe the hazards to ground and mounted personnel working around a helicopter.
2. Describe the proper approach to a helicopter, including direction of approach and communication with the crew.
3. Describe the considerations for selecting and preparing a landing zone (LZ).

I. Field Communications

1. Define the common problems associated with the field use of portable radios and list some possible solutions.

2. Describe basic Virginia SAR Council radio procedures.
- J. First Aid
1. The handler must have current Basic First Aid, or equivalent, or higher.
 2. The handler must have current 1-person CPR Certification.

IV. EQUINE PERFORMANCE EXPECTATIONS

The horse will demonstrate compliance with the expectations of this section. Specific tests designed for this purpose described in Section V. TEST METHODS, and are included as part of these standards.

- A. Behavior
1. The horse should be quiet and well mannered.
 2. The horse should show no aggression toward people and domestic animals.
 3. The horse must demonstrate the ability to transport between search sites easily.
 4. The horse must demonstrate the ability to stand quietly while tethered.
 5. The horse must demonstrate the ability to work independently from the herd.
- B. Agility
1. Using multiple gaits, the horse must demonstrate the ability to move forward.
 2. The horse must demonstrate the ability to move backward.
 3. The horse must demonstrate the ability to ford creeks and streams.
 4. The horse must demonstrate the ability to cross bridges.
 5. The horse must demonstrate the ability to negotiate obstacles normally found in the wilderness.

V. TEST METHODS

The following testing procedures are designed to provide a representative evaluation of the expectations listed in Sections III and IV.

- A. Handler Written Test
1. The handler will complete a comprehensive written test containing questions representative of these standards and will achieve a passing score.
- B. Written Evaluation Procedures
1. Written certification testing described in these standards may be conducted only by a VDES State Certified GSAR instructor. Testing materials and checklists will be supplied to the

evaluator as needed by the state SAR Coordinator.

C. Equine Field Test

1. The equine team will perform the following tests at a walk unless otherwise indicated. During the evaluation, the handler must maintain control of the horse, and the horse should act mannered and calm.

2. Perform the following tests **without** the handler mounted:
 - a. Stand quietly while the rider mounts.
 - b. Load the horse on a horse trailer of the handler's choice within five (5) minutes - time beginning when the horse approaches the entry point of the trailer, and time ending when the horse is secured in the trailer with all trailer doors closed. The handler may use one assistant.
 - c. Unload the horse from a horse trailer of the handler's choice within two (2) minutes - time beginning when the exit door is opened and ending when the horse is off the trailer. The handler may use one assistant.
 - d. Calmly stand tied on long or short lead for a period not less than thirty (30) minutes.
 - e. Stand quietly, while being held with a minimum of two (2) other horses by another handler, other than the owner, for a minimum period of three (3) minutes.
 - f. Possess the ability to be ponied by another rider for a distance of 100 feet

3. Perform the following tests **with** the handler mounted:
 - a. Using one hand on the horse's reins, control the horse turning left, turning right, and stopping.
 - b. Under control, slowly move up and down perpendicular to the ridge of a hill with an incline of at least 45 degrees for a minimum distance of 100 feet.
 - c. Stand quietly for a minimum of two (2) minutes in each position - on the flat, facing uphill on a hill with an incline of at least 45 degrees, and downhill on a hill with an incline of at least 45 degrees.
 - d. Walk through a body of water at least three (3) feet wide and six (6) inches deep.
 - e. Cross a wooden bridge.
 - f. Cross an area of mud requiring a minimum of four (4) steps.
 - g. Travel through heavily wooded and/or brushy areas.
 - h. Back a minimum of six (6) feet within a four (4) foot wide parallel track.
 - i. Cross over an obstacle at least 18 inches in height.
 - j. Separate and move out of sight from other horses and people at a minimum distance of

- 100 feet without difficulty.
- k. At a gait faster than a walk, separate and move out of sight from other horses and people at a minimum distance of 100 feet without difficulty.
 - l. Simulating a line search, maintain a three horse line (side-by-side) formation with a minimum of ten (10) feet, and a maximum of twelve (12) feet between stirrups for a minimum distance of 200 feet.
 - m. While being subjected to loud noises from whistles, sirens, automobile horns, etc., stand quietly for a minimum period of one (1) minute.
 - n. While being subjected to distractions from opening umbrellas, flying flags, moving trash bags, and road flares, stand quietly during the distractions and for a minimum period of one (1) minute after the distractions have stopped.
 - o. At night, stand quietly while being subjected to bright lights flashing in the horses eyes.
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- p. Stand quietly, while the handler holds a minimum of two (2) other horses for a minimum period of three (3) minutes.
 - q. Pony another riderless horse for a distance of 100 feet
4. Perform the following test **with or without** the handler mounted:
- a. With vehicular traffic moving a minimum of six (6) feet from the head of the horse, stand and move under control.

D. Equine Field Evaluation Procedures

- 1. Except where required for the examination, evaluations will be conducted on an individual mounted team basis without interference from other horses or people.
- 2. Each team will be observed by one (1) evaluator which must be certified according to the requirements in Appendix E.
- 3. Evaluation scoring:
 - a. The evaluator will have a check list for scoring each of the mounted teams. (See Appendix D)
 - b. Performance of the mounted team will be rated as either “Satisfactory” or “Unsatisfactory”.

E. Retesting

- 1. If the score on the written test is below the passing score, the handler may arrange for a retest with any evaluator that is a VDES state certified GSAR Instructor. The written test may not be repeated within the same day.
- 2. If any one of the field tests is scored “Unsatisfactory”, that test may be repeated once that same day at the discretion of the evaluator.
- 3. If the second attempt at a test is rated “Unsatisfactory”, that portion may be re-evaluated no sooner than one (1) month or later than six (6) months after the initial test date.

4. The evaluator that originally tested the team, and judged it to be “Unsatisfactory” on the first two (2) attempts, must be the evaluator for the third (3rd) retest.
5. After three (3) “Unsatisfactory” attempts, a mounted team cannot be used as a SAR asset until it can pass the entire test offered at the next scheduled testing opportunity.
6. If the evaluatee feels that he is being unfairly rated, then he may request a retest with a different evaluator at the next scheduled testing opportunity. The evaluator who rated the team unsatisfactory may observe the retest but will have no input on the evaluation results. This request for retest will be submitted by the evaluatee, in writing, through the unit’s designated liaison officer. The written request will state the reason(s) that the evaluatee felt they were unfairly rated.

F. Method of Conducting State Recognized Evaluations

Groups whose internal evaluation procedures meet or exceed these standards may use those procedures for certification testing, provided the following conditions are met:

1. The procedures, checklist, written test and field test are approved by VDES State SAR Coordinator.
2. The group is a member in good standing of the Virginia SAR Council.
3. The approved written test answer sheet and field test is completed and signed by the evaluator(s).

VI. CERTIFICATION PROCEDURES

A. Prerequisites

1. In order to be certified as an “Equestrian Search Team” the team must be an active member in good standing of a SAR group currently operating under a Memorandum of Understanding (M.O.U.) with the Commonwealth.
2. The applicant must have satisfactorily completed all of the written and practical evaluations described in Section V. TEST METHODS, A through D.
3. The owner of the horse must provide an up-to-date copy of a negative Coggins test issued from the Virginia Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services, or from the state of origin if the horse is not boarded in the Commonwealth.

B. Team Certification Application Instructions

1. The candidate must submit an application for certification to the office of the State SAR Coordinator.
2. The application must be signed by both the applicant and the group leader or training officer and must include the following items.
 - a. The score sheet from the written test described in Section V. A. The score sheet must be signed and dated by the evaluator.
 - b. The checklists from the evaluations described in Section V. B through D. The checklists must be signed and dated by the evaluator.
 - c. Successfully completed all field evaluations.
 - d. A statement that the applicant possesses personal equipment at least equivalent to the

list in APPENDIX A.

- e. A statement that the applicant has completed an overnight bivouac at least equivalent to the one described in APPENDIX B.
 3. Upon receipt of the above documentation of requirements, the State SAR Coordinator will send confirmation of certification to the individual mounted team's unit.
 4. Upon completion of all the requirements outlined in this document, the certified team is eligible to respond as a state SAR resource on any State Mission with a valid mission number designation, as a representative of the unit holding the M.O.U..
- C. Conditions of Certification
1. Provided that all requirements are met, the team will be issued a certification by the Virginia Department of Emergency Services as an "Equestrian Search Team".
 2. This certification does not constitute a license to practice the skills tested, but signifies only that the team holding the certificate has met an established standard of knowledge and performance and has demonstrated competency at the level indicated.
 3. The certification will be valid for two (2) years, with an interim update required 12 months after the initial certification date.
 4. The certification will be for the handler and horse (team) that completed the testing together. If the handler wishes to certify as a team with another horse, the entire testing procedure, with the exception of the written test, must be repeated with the new horse.
 5. The certified handler will be allowed to ride only the horse they certify on.

VII. RE-CERTIFICATION PROCEDURES

- A. First Year - Interim Certificate Re-validation
1. At the end of one (1) year, the handler will receive a notice of revalidation.
 2. In order to revalidate the certification for a period of one (1) additional year, the handler must submit a letter from the group leader or training officer requesting that the team's certification be renewed and stating that:
 - a. The team remains an active member in good standing.
 - b. The letter should also indicate the number of searches in which the team has participated within the past year.
 - c. The kinds of training the team has participated in during the past year.
 3. This documentation must be submitted to the State SAR Coordinator no later than June 30th of each year.
 4. The certification will be renewed for one (1) additional year.
- B. Second Year - Recertification
- At the end of the second year, the handler will receive a notice of renewal. In order to maintain certification past the second anniversary of a team's initial certification, or field evaluated re-certification, the team must:

1. Be considered to be an active member in good standing within his/her organization
 2. Take and successfully complete, within three (3) months before or after the anniversary date, a field test as described in V. TEST METHODS, Sections C and D
 3. Submit a letter from the group leader or training officer:
 - a. Requesting that the team's certification be renewed
 - b. Stating that the team remains an active member in good standing
 - c. Indicating the number of searches in which the team has participated within the past year
 - d. Explaining the kinds of training the team has participated in during the past year
 - e. Including the evaluation sheet indicating successful completion of the Field Test described in Section V. TEST METHODS, C and D
 4. Upon successful completion of the field evaluation and receipt of a letter from the group leader or training officer, the certification will be renewed for two (2) additional years. An Interim Certificate Re-validation will be required for the following year as described in VII. RE-CERTIFICATION PROCEDURES, Section A.
- C. Failure to Re-certify
1. If a team fails to re-certify within three (3) months of the expiration date, the certification is dropped and the candidate will be required to complete the entire application and testing process for certification again. The team cannot be used as a SAR asset until certification is completed.

APPENDIX A

GUIDELINES FOR SUGGESTED MINIMUM PERSONAL EQUIPMENT FOR THE EQUESTRIAN SEARCH TEAM

These items are not required, but are suggested equipment. Equivalent gear would be acceptable and this list may be modified to adapt to the seasonal and special conditions. Not all of this would be carried into the field, but should be available to the individual searcher on the mission in some form. This would include a vehicle cache or pack to be left at base.

1. Wind shell jacket with hood
2. Water resistant jacket or parka with hood. A Gore-Tex or similar jacket can serve for both items 1 and 2
3. Rain pants or rain chaps - add gaiters for winter
4. Heavy *wool shirts or sweaters as required
5. *Wool pants
6. Long underwear of *wool, silk, polypro or other suitable synthetic material - cotton thermal underwear is not acceptable
7. *Wool stocking cap or balaclava - a scarf is recommended if a stocking cap is used

8. Heavy *wool socks with lightweight liner socks
9. Leather gloves with *wool liners - mittens are suggested for extremely cold weather
10. Backpacking or mountaineering boots appropriate to the terrain and conditions - boots with heels are recommended when riding
11. Backpack, saddle bags or fanny pack suitable for day pack use
12. Canteens or water bottles containing a minimum of 2 quarts of water **(REQUIRED)**
13. Multi-blade pocketknife
14. Whistle - **(REQUIRED)**
15. Orienteering-type compass - **(REQUIRED)**
16. Flashlight or head lamp with alkaline or lithium batteries, spare batteries and spare bulbs - head lamp preferred **(REQUIRED)**
17. Waterproof matches or disposable lighter **(REQUIRED)**
18. Personal first-aid kit **(REQUIRED)**, to include adequate supplies for the horse
19. Storm shelter: Tube tent, space blanket, lightweight tarp
20. Two 30-gallon heavy-duty trash bags - **(REQUIRED)**
21. Zip-loc bags of various sizes **(REQUIRED)**
22. One-day minimum supply of quick energy food
23. Sleeping bag, Ensolite or similar sleeping pad
24. 20 gallons of water for your horse
25. Enough hay, grain, and water to sustain your horse for three (3) days **(REQUIRED)**
27. ASTM approved riding helmet **(REQUIRED)**
28. Rope - 20' minimum - **(REQUIRED)**
29. 6' - 8' lead-line **(REQUIRED)**
30. 1" webbing - 20' minimum
31. Flagging tape **(REQUIRED)**
32. Insect repellent for you and horse
33. Hoofpick **(REQUIRED)**
34. Collapsible water bucket
35. Wire cutters

*Wool is the fabric of choice for cold weather clothing, but an insulating material such as polyester pile may be substituted if necessary. Down is not acceptable.

APPENDIX B

GUIDELINES FOR AN OVERNIGHT BIVOUAC FOR THE EQUESTRIAN SEARCH TEAM

1. The purpose of the overnight bivouac is to test the individual's ability to spend the night in the out-of-doors in a bivouac, with their horse, and still be able to function adequately the next day.
2. The reason for this requirement is that a search and rescue person may find themselves in a situation in the field where they are forced to spend the night with whatever equipment they happen to have with them.
3. In order to simulate this situation for an evaluation, the following guidelines should apply:
 - a. The individual's equipment should be restricted to what they normally carry in a "day pack" during an

- actual search.
- b. The bivouac area should be typical terrain found in searches and far enough from roads and vehicles to create some sense of realism.
 - c. Access to vehicles and equipment caches during the bivouac should be denied.
4. The bivouac should not become an exercise in raw survival. The evaluators should inspect each person's equipment and help ensure that it is at least minimally adequate for the environment.
 5. Safety is of paramount importance. The participating individuals should be monitored carefully during the night to ensure that problems such as hypothermia do not develop. The evaluators should have a contingency plan for such emergencies.
 6. The bivouac should be planned in conjunction with a training or testing activity the following day. This will give the evaluators an opportunity to observe the effects of the bivouac on the performance of the participants.
 7. The bivouac must be done with the horse that is being tested, insuring that the person has adequate rope with which to make a picket line to tie the horse. The area should also be fenced in the event that the horse gets loose.

APPENDIX C

EVALUATOR INSTRUCTIONS

1. Written test materials will be issued to the evaluators by the State SAR Coordinator upon request. All test materials are confidential and security is the responsibility of the evaluator to who it is issued.
2. All tests and evaluations will be scored on approved forms that have been approved by the State SAR

Coordinator and will be signed by the evaluator(s).

3. The objectives of the behavior and agility evaluations are to help ensure that both the horse and handler can work together as a team safely, efficiently and in conjunction with other teams and personnel. Performance on these evaluations should be as written.

APPENDIX D

EQUINE PERFORMANCE EVALUATION CHECK-LIST

Rider _____

Horse _____

Location of Evaluation Site _____

TEST	SATISFACTORY	UNSATISFACTORY 1st Attempt	UNSATISFACTORY 2nd Attempt	RETEST 3rd Attempt Sat./Unsat. / Date
<i>RIDER DISMOUNTED</i>				
Stand quietly while rider is mounting				
Load on trailer 5 minutes				
Unload from trailer 2 minutes				
Tied on a lead 30 minutes				
Be held with 2 other horses 3 minutes				
Ponied by another rider 100 feet				
<i>RIDER MOUNTED</i>				
Turning with 1 hand				
Move up and down 45° hill 100 feet				
Stand quietly - Flat 2 minutes				
Stand quietly - Uphill 2 minutes.				
Stand quietly - Downhill 2 minutes.				
Cross water - min. 3' wide and 6" deep				
Cross wooden bridge				
Cross mud 4 steps				
Travel through woods				
TEST	SATISFACTORY	UNSATISFACTORY 1st Attempt	UNSATISFACTORY 2nd Attempt	RETEST 3rd Attempt Sat./Unsat. / Date
Back through parallel 6 feet				

Cross an 18" obstacle				
Leave Group - Gait 1 100 feet				
Leave Group - Gait 2 100 feet				
Search formation 200 feet				
React to loud noises 1 minute				
React to distractions 1 minute				
React to bright light - at night				
Holding 2 other horses 3 minutes				
Pony another horse 100 feet				
<i>OPTIONAL - MOUNTED OR DISMOUNTED</i>				
Control in traffic 5 complete passes of traffic				

Evaluator _____ Date _____ Pass ___ Fail ___

Retest Evaluator _____ Date _____ Pass ___ Fail ___

APPENDIX E

CRITERIA FOR STATE EVALUATORS

In order to be a recognized evaluator of the Standards For Equestrian Search Teams, an individual must satisfy the following criteria:

- A. The written test evaluator must be a VDES State Certified GSAR Instructor.
- B. Field evaluations will be conducted by a person that has met the qualifications set forth in these standards to be a state certified Equestrian Search Team, and:
 - 1. Has been certified by their unit, or other state evaluators, as eligible to respond to searches
 - 2. Must have responded to a minimum of five (5) searches
 - 3. Must have been nominated by his/her unit to become a state evaluator