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# How much is a saved life worth? 13

**Pony up: Grateful families should offer more than thanks to search-and-rescue teams, which rely on donations**

It didn't hurt the arc of the story that the rescue subject — Julie Marie Abrahamsen — was young, blond, pretty and Norwegian, and it didn't hurt, either, that her surviving three miserable nights in the Whistler wilderness was seen as "a miracle." People like miracles.



DAVE STEERS/THE CANADIAN PRESS

**The cost of search-and-rescue teams at resorts like Whistler Blackcomb is underwritten by the volunteer rescuers themselves, who work without pay.**

People, however, are less inclined toward the foolhardy and the recklessly unprepared — which, by the sounds of it, Abrahamsen could be accused of.

She skied out of bounds (whether on purpose or by accident is still unclear, though one report stated she followed a group of skiers out of bounds). She had only been in Whistler since late December. She lacked extra food and survival supplies. She did not stay put, as search-and-rescue experts are constantly exhorting skiers and hikers to do, but tried to walk out. Several times, she crossed a glacier-fed creek.

And three days passed before one of her housemates felt discomfited enough by her absence to contact the local RCMP. When they finally were contacted, this is what happened:

The RCMP treated it as a missing persons case. They began an investigation — checking the usual social network sites, interviewing family and friends, including those in Norway, pinging her cellphone, checking her credit card usage and searching the local logging roads.

The actual backcountry search was delegated, as usual, to the Whistler and Blackcomb search-and-rescue teams. Those members have regular jobs, of course, and the time they devote to search-and-rescue operations costs them income. For example, Brad Sills, the team's senior manager, is president of the Callaghan Country Wilderness Adventures Ltd., and runs a lodge and ski-tour operation in the Callaghan Valley. Other than the costs of a per diem for meals, gas mileage and a command vehicle, which are funded by the government, the members of the search and rescue team do not get paid for their efforts. Everything else, Sills said, is self-funded.

That is, the search-and-rescue costs for what has been consistently rated as the world's best ski resort — and one of the wealthiest — is underwritten by volunteers who, in doing so, are either incredibly brave and altruistic or, and I write this with all due respect, crazy. I suspect it's probably a little bit of both.

Other expenses incurred during the search?

An ambulance was put on standby. A helicopter had to be chartered for three hours, at a cost, Sills said, "somewhere north of \$2,000 per hour." When Abrahamsen was finally extricated from the backcountry, she was examined by medical staff at a local clinic. And, oh yes, she asked for a ham-and-cheese submarine sandwich because she was famished. I could not determine if she paid for it or not. (I joke. Sort of.)

Should Abrahamsen be billed for the cost of her search and rescue?

Sills, for one, thought not — some would argue it was just the cost of doing business in a place like Whistler, he said. The resort generates millions of dollars in revenue for businesses and plenty of tax dollars for the government — he felt charging for search and rescue could make skiers less inclined to come here if they or their families could be on the hook for the cost of a search. Plenty of people ski out of bounds, he said, and in a place like Canada, recreating in the great outdoors always comes with inherent risks.

Sills was also willing to cut Abrahamsen some slack for the fact she wasn't a resident. Yes, she was an experienced snowboarder and alpine skier, but in Europe, you're never far from a road or a farmer's field. It's harder to get lost there. That may explain why she tried to walk out.

Sills, however, had less sympathy for British Columbians who get lost in his backyard — 80 per cent of whom, he said, are from Metro Vancouver. They should know better.

Some ski hills have tried to bill skiers and snowboarders for the cost of search and rescue, but there is no law saying those being billed have to pay.

The Whistler Search and Rescue team does accept donations, however. Sills said the largest the team received was \$10,000 from a Japanese family for their daughter's rescue. To me, that's a bargain. And to Abrahamsen's family, I would say, the Whistler search and rescue team got your daughter back to you, free of charge, and at some risk to themselves.



I don't know that family's financial circumstances, or if they have made a donation already, but if they haven't they should.

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