

HOUSE JOINT RESOLUTION NO. 62

Directing the Virginia State Crime Commission to study the current state of readiness of Virginia's Law Enforcement and Search and Rescue efforts for rapid and well-coordinated deployment in all missing, endangered, and abducted person cases. Report.

Agreed to by the House of Delegates, February 5, 2014

Agreed to by the Senate, February 25, 2014

WHEREAS, according to an August 2013 report released by the Virginia State Police, Virginia currently has 342 missing children cases that are still open, some dating back a decade or more; and

WHEREAS, dozens of young women and men have been reported missing, endangered, or abducted in the past 20 years in Virginia with very few cases resolving in a rescue or recovery of the abducted person or arrest of a suspect; and

WHEREAS, when an abducted person remains missing, it leaves the families with no closure and they remain in agony, caught in a suspended state of fear, anticipation, longing, and despair; and

WHEREAS, law enforcement experience demonstrates that the longer a person or child remains missing, the less likely it is that the person or child will be returned safely; and

WHEREAS, with each passing day, potential evidence that could identify a suspect degrades, thus lessening the likelihood of apprehension and prosecution of the offender, leaving a dangerous offender at large to commit further crimes and harm additional victims; and

WHEREAS, current research on over 800 abducted child murder cases done by the Washington State Attorney General's office has established that there is a science behind search and rescue strategies in cases of abducted and endangered victims; and

WHEREAS, according to the Washington study, 46 percent of child abduction murderers have a history of crimes against children; 44 percent of killers were strangers and 42 percent were family friends or acquaintances; in 46 percent of cases, the victim was found within one-and-a-half miles of where the victim was last seen and within 12 miles in another 30 percent of cases; and in 36 percent of cases, the victim was last seen within one-fourth of a mile from the abductor/killer's home; and

WHEREAS, deployment of rapid search and rescue efforts and strategies have met with resistance in Virginia due to territorial, jurisdictional, and staffing issues across law-enforcement agencies and varying levels of knowledge concerning developments in the field of search and rescue; and

WHEREAS, despite massive resources that exist federally for abducted children from funding to the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children, missing children in Virginia still experience deadly delays and inconsistency in deployment of their published and disseminated missing information, national press engagement, family support services, and amber alerts; and

WHEREAS, no federal resources exist for missing adults, leaving families of abducted young persons with responsibility for coordinating search efforts; and

WHEREAS, Virginia has a Search and Rescue office and a Search and Rescue Council under the Virginia Department of Emergency Management (VDEM) with over 500 trained and certified search and rescue experts who deploy pro bono; and

WHEREAS, all Virginians will benefit if law enforcement and Virginia's search and rescue resources are better coordinated across all localities in order to facilitate the immediate search for any missing, endangered, or abducted person; now, therefore, be it

RESOLVED by the House of Delegates, the Senate concurring, That the Virginia State Crime Commission be directed to study the current state of readiness of Virginia's Law Enforcement and Search and Rescue efforts for rapid and well-coordinated deployment in all missing, endangered, and abducted person cases.

The study shall (i) examine cases where a well-coordinated, large-scale, rapid search and rescue effort was not deployed, including but not limited to the cases of Alicia Showalter Reynolds, Alexis Murphy, and Morgan Harrington and each endangered or abducted child/person case that did not result in the rescue or recovery of the missing person; (ii) examine cases in which an endangered or abducted person/child did result in the rescue or recovery of the missing person and how the response of the law-enforcement agency with jurisdiction was different; (iii) determine how often the search strategies from the Washington Study have been immediately deployed (within hours of the report) in Virginia on endangered and abducted person cases and why those strategies were not deployed immediately in other cases; (iv) consider the time delays in Virginia for engaging the national media and reasons for those delays; and (v) consider reasons for lack of support from the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children, including situations in which there have been long delays in deployment of missing child information, activation of amber alerts, and provision of support services for families.

In conducting its study, the Virginia State Crime Commission shall examine what needs to be done in order to get increased, large-scale rapid search and rescue coordination efforts, immediate notification to VDEM when a person/child is determined to be endangered or abducted, additional resources and staffing needs for VDEM and law enforcement, cross-training between command staff and VDEM Search and Rescue, and family support services and to implement other recommendations the Crime Commission deems necessary.

Technical assistance shall be provided to the Virginia State Crime Commission by the Department of State Police and the Virginia Department of Emergency Management Search and Rescue office, and the Virginia Search and Rescue Council and the families of missing and abducted persons/children shall be consulted. All agencies of the Commonwealth shall provide assistance to the Virginia State Crime Commission for this study, upon request.

The Virginia State Crime Commission shall complete its meetings by November 30, 2014, and the chairman shall submit to the Division of Legislative Automated Systems an executive summary of its findings and recommendations no later than the first day of the 2015 Regular Session of the General Assembly. The executive summary shall state whether the Virginia State Crime Commission intends to submit to the General Assembly and the Governor a report of its findings and recommendations for publication as a House or Senate document. The executive summary and report shall be submitted as provided in the procedures of the Division of Legislative Automated Systems for the processing of legislative documents and reports and shall be posted on the General Assembly's website.