



PENNSYLVANIA EMERGENCY
HEALTH SERVICES COUNCIL
Your Voice In EMS

RECOMMENDATION FOR CONSIDERATION

Board Meeting Date: December 4, 2019

Subject: Unmanned Aircraft Systems Impact on Air Ambulance Safety

VTR#: 1219-02

Committee/Task Force: Critical Care Transport Task Force

☒ Recommended Goal

☐ Recommended Policy Change

☐ Other:

Recommendation:

The Pennsylvania Department of Health should partner with other appropriate state agencies to initiate a public information and education campaign to increase awareness of the dangers unmanned aircraft systems (UAS) pose to air ambulances on emergency incidents.

Rationale [Background]:

Unmanned aircraft systems, commonly referred to as “drones,” have become a popular recreational activity for aspiring pilots, are used by the media for electronic news gathering at emergency incidents and have become an integral part of the emergency incident management system to obtain a 360 degree view of the scene.

When air ambulances are operating at emergency incidents, a UAS can pose a serious safety threat if it ventures into a helicopter’s approach or departure path. These aircraft are small, agile, fast and unlike a full size aircraft, very difficult to visualize. Unmanned Aircraft Systems are regulated by the Federal Aviation Administration. UAS pilots are required to comply with a numerous airspace restrictions, including over an emergency incident. Interfering with an emergency response effort is a federal offense under 49 USC § 46320, punishable by a fine of up to \$20,000 per violation.

In response to this safety threat, air ambulance operators in some areas of the country have initiated a local or regional campaign to educate the public about how a UAS can create a serious and potential deadly safety issue, for medical helicopters. In Pennsylvania, Penn State Health’s LifeLion Critical Care Transport service created the “No Drone Zone” safety campaign (figure 1), for which they received the *Vision-Zero Aviation Safety Award from the Association of Air Medical Services*.



Figure 1 LifeLion Drone Safety Campaign

PEHSC recognizes the Pennsylvania Department of Health does not play a regulatory role in aviation; but does have the ability to partner with other state agencies such as PennDOT, PA Emergency Management Agency and Office of the State Fire Commissioner, to explore the feasibility of a statewide UAS safety campaign. Such an effort should target not only the general public, but include 911 centers, law enforcement, fire service and electronic news media.

Medical Review [Concerns]:

n/a

Fiscal Concerns:

Development and distribution of a campaign intended to reach a broad target audience can be a time-consuming and expensive venture. PEHSC recognizes that a single state agency may not have the budgetary resources for such a project; it is for this reason that we recommend a creative and financial collaboration amongst multiple agencies. Existing media resources may be available to avoid creating original content.

Educational Concerns:

The educational campaign could be tailored to a target audience, or a general campaign could be developed; budgetary constraints will play a central role in this decision.

Plan of Implementation:

Following campaign development, the Commonwealth will utilize their considerable resources to distribute the information to the media and other appropriate outlets.

The PEHSC Committee/Task Force offers consultation to the Department in regard to the content of this Vote to Recommend (VTR) and its attached documents. The PEHSC Committee/Task Force specifically offers staff or member support to participate in Department deliberations regarding this recommendation in an effort to convey committee/task force discussions.

Board Meeting Comments/Concerns:

A board member reinforced the importance of educating the public safety community, who with increasing frequency are using a UAS as part of their incident management strategy. When an air ambulance is dispatched to the incident, the incident commander should immediately communicate to the PSAP that a UAS is in use.

Signed: David Jones
President

Date: 12-4-19

For PEHSC Use Only – PA Department of Health Response

Accept:____ Table:____ Modify:____ Reject:____

Comments:

Date of Department Response:_____