

## FEDERAL AVIATION ADMINISTRATION

# 'We move at the speed of safety'

## Medical helicopter industry alerted to coming FAA regulations

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with wire reports  
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**A**t a Congressional hearing last month, a Federal Aviation Administration official said that changes in procedures and new safety equipment were needed to make medical helicopters safer.

And on the home front, air ambulance crews know that those changes could be years off, but that the most important thing they can do in the mean time is to stay alert.

"We walk out to the helicopter," said Larry Wall, a flight nurse with Superior Ambulance Service out of Elmhurst. "We don't run out here and jump in. We move at the speed of safety."

Medical helicopters transport seriously ill patients or donor organs to emergency care facilities. The pressure to conduct these operations safely and quickly in all conditions, including during inclement weather, at night and on unfamiliar landing sites, has the potential to increase operational risk compared to normal passenger-carrying aviation operations.

More than 800 helicopters in the U.S. are used as medical helicopters, according to the Federal Aviation Administration.

John Allen, the FAA's director of flight standards, told Congress last month the agency would soon begin procedures to make mandatory certain safety equipment and procedures in medical helicopters.

Over the past year, the NTSB has investigated nine fatal medical helicopter crashes, which killed 35 people. This drastic increase in fatalities prompted the public hearing before Congress.

A crash that occurred Oct. 15 in Aurora killed a 1-year-old patient, the pilot, a paramedic and a flight nurse on board an Air Angels' Bell 222 helicopter. The copter clipped a radio tower and went down in a field along Eola Road.

FAA officials say the next steps in improving safety includes providing helicopter pilots with the latest weather reports, installation of software for terrain warning systems and requiring crews to wear night-



Superior Ambulance's Air Med flight nurse Larry Wall explains flight crew training and safety procedures. **ON THE COVER:** Superior Ambulance's Air Med 1 pilot Jeff Meisenger (left) and paramedic Jeanne Kuttbauer go over safety procedures for the Eurocopter 135 aircraft.

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vision goggles – measures that could cost about \$100,000 a helicopter. The FAA will have to allow for time for public comments and the new rules might not take effect until 2011.

"That is a conservative estimate," Wall said. "We already use night-vision goggles. For a three-man crew, the cost is \$30,000 for the goggles and that does not include the cost of training."

Wall said the terrain awareness warning systems are now only available for fixed-wing aircraft and would have to be modified for helicopter use. The systems would alert airborne crews to hills, power lines, water towers and cell-phone towers.

Wall belongs to an aircrew that includes a paramedic and pilot. There is just enough room inside Air Med 1 – the Eurocopter BO 105 twin-engine helicopter – for a patient on

a stretcher. Any member of the Superior crew can cancel the flight if there is a concern about safety, whether it's crew fatigue or concerns about fog, thunderstorms, blizzards and icing conditions.

"We all have a voice," Wall said.

Superior Ambulance rents hangar space at DuPage Airport east of St. Charles. Wall said when his crew is not transporting a patient, they are constantly going over safety and medical procedures.

Superior Ambulance has offered medical helicopter service since October 2007, Wall said, and mostly transports patients between hospitals. Superior has worked with the Batavia Fire Department, transporting patients from the scenes of accidents.

Randy Deicke, Batavia's new fire chief, said whether to use an ambulance versus a helicopter depends on timing and the sever-

ity of the accident.

He said the head paramedic at the scene makes the call. Helicopters are not used often by his department, only about three times a year, he estimated.

"Usually when we call in a helicopter it involves an extraction," Deicke said. "We get the person out of the vehicle. That takes time. You have to determine weather, traffic and if it would be quicker to take them by air."

Deicke said getting a patient to a level-one trauma center such as Good Samaritan in Downers Grove by way of helicopter could take 5 to 10 minutes.

Driving the patient in an ambulance could be up to 25 minutes.

The cost of operating a helicopter is around \$1,000 an hour, not including the cost of the pilot and the crew, Wall said.