

IAMTCS Position Statement

Recommended Standards for Annual Helicopter Shopping Awareness Training for Communication Centers

Established by the IAMTCS Board of Directors

Effective Date: October 27, 2025

Purpose

The International Association of Medical Transport Communication Specialists (IAMTCS) establishes this standard to improve safety in air medical operations by **preventing and raising awareness of helicopter shopping**.

Annual training ensures that communication specialists understand how to share critical information, support pilot decision-making, and promote clear, consistent communication between all agencies involved in helicopter requests.

Our Position

The International Association of Medical Transport Communication Specialists (IAMTCS) advocates for the immediate implementation of **annual mandatory training on helicopter shopping** for all communication center personnel involved in requesting EMS helicopter services.

This essential measure strengthens the safety and effectiveness of air medical operations by ensuring consistent communication, informed decision-making, and shared situational awareness across all agencies.

Definition and Risk Context

Helicopter shopping is the unsafe practice of contacting multiple air medical providers sequentially until one agrees to accept a mission after others have declined, often for reasons related to weather, night operations, or operational limits.

This practice introduces unnecessary pressure on flight crews, undermines operational integrity, and increases the potential for preventable accidents.

From 2000 through 2020, national safety data identified **83 EMS helicopter accidents** in the United States, resulting in **239 fatalities** involving medical crew members, pilots, and patients. Of these events, **72.4 percent were attributed to helicopter operations**, and **weather or nighttime factors were cited in more than one-third**.

Critically, **human factors contributed to nearly 87 percent of fatal crashes**, underscoring that most tragedies stem not from equipment failure but from **communication lapses, inadequate information exchange, or flawed decision-making**. These statistics reinforce the urgent need for ongoing education and annual training to mitigate preventable human-factor risks in air medical operations.

Communication centers serve as the first link in the safety chain. When prior refusals are not communicated to subsequent providers, pilots may unknowingly accept missions already declined for safety reasons.

Transparent communication regarding prior declines is essential to protect patients, crews, and the public.

Training Content Requirements

Annual helicopter shopping awareness training should include, at minimum:

- The definition and risks of helicopter shopping
- Pilot decision-making and weather minimums
- “Red, Yellow, Green” risk-assessment systems
- Information-sharing and refusal-notification procedures
- Ground-transport contingency planning
- Adherence to CAMTS and nationally recognized best practices

The **Commission on Accreditation of Medical Transport Systems (CAMTS)** addresses helicopter shopping in its *12th Edition Accreditation Standards (Standard 04.03.02)* as part of initial communication-center education.

IAMTCS extends this guidance by establishing **annual refresher training** as a recommended industry standard to ensure ongoing competency as personnel, technologies, and operational environments evolve.

Implementation Recommendations

IAMTCS recommends that all communication centers, requesting agencies and hospital systems:

- Incorporate annual helicopter shopping awareness training into required education, quality-assurance, and safety programs.
- Document completion and competency through verifiable records within each organization’s learning-management or training-tracking system.
- Utilize available free resources, including the AAMS/FAA Helicopter Shopping Awareness Program and IAMTCS-developed supplemental training materials.

These measures ensure consistent understanding of safety expectations, enhance coordination between dispatchers and flight crews, and reduce human-factor risk during critical decision-making moments.

Conclusion

Annual helicopter shopping awareness training is an essential component of safe and accountable air medical communication practices.

Establishing this requirement supports informed decision-making, promotes transparency among providers, and reduces preventable accidents caused by incomplete or inconsistent information sharing.

IAMTCS urges all organizations to adopt these standards as part of a comprehensive safety and education framework that protects patients, flight crews, and communications staff while upholding the integrity of the mission.

References

- Cambridge University Press (2023). *Fatal Air Medical Accidents in the United States, 2000–2020*.
- Emergency Medicine Residents’ Association (2021). *Helicopter EMS: Safety, Trends, and Medical Decision-Making*.
- Federal Aviation Administration (2023). *HEMS Safety Fact Sheet*.
- AeroAssurance (2015). *Analysis of U.S. HEMS Accidents (2006–2015)*.
- Commission on Accreditation of Medical Transport Systems (2022). *12th Edition Accreditation Standards, Standard 04.03.02.**