Recommended Standards for Drone Awareness in Air Medical Communications

Established by the IAMTCS Board of Directors
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Purpose

The International Association of Medical Transport Communication Specialists (IAMTCS) establishes the following standards to improve safety in air medical operations by promoting routine drone awareness among communication center personnel.

Routine drone awareness enables communications specialists to identify, communicate, and coordinate responses to unmanned aircraft system (UAS) activity that may affect air medical missions, scene access, landing zones, or helipad operations. These standards are intended to strengthen situational awareness, reduce operational risk, and support safe mission planning for all air medical programs.

IAMTCS Position

IAMTCS advocates for the adoption of routine drone awareness as a standard element of air medical communications.

Drone activity is now part of the modern airspace environment and should no longer be considered an uncommon event. Communication centers must be prepared to recognize, communicate, and respond to drone activity as part of routine mission planning and operational coordination.

Drone operations may be conducted by hobbyists, public safety agencies, law enforcement, transportation departments, utility companies, media organizations, or commercial operators. Regardless of the operator, drone activity has the potential to affect scene access, landing zones, patient movement, helipad operations, and helicopter routing.

Because timely communication is essential to safe mission execution, IAMTCS supports making drone awareness a routine component of communications center operations.

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Definition and Risk Context

The Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) projects that the United States small unmanned aircraft systems (sUAS) fleet will exceed **2.4 million aircraft**, reflecting the rapid growth of drones across both public and private sectors.

Public safety agencies increasingly deploy drones for emergency response, search and rescue, fire suppression, law enforcement, disaster assessment, and other operational missions. As drone operations continue to expand, so does the likelihood of interaction with air medical aircraft.

Drone-aircraft conflicts remain a documented aviation safety concern.

Federal Aviation Administration analyses have identified:

- More than **6,100 reported near encounters** between crewed and uncrewed aircraft from 2014 through 2018.
- Approximately **20 percent** of validated drone sighting reports involved aircraft operating within **500 feet** of one another.
- Multiple reported **near mid-air collisions (NMACs)** and incidents requiring evasive action by flight crews.
- Continuing reports of near-miss events in Class D and other controlled airspace commonly used by helicopters and general aviation.

Communication centers represent the first operational link in the safety chain. Timely awareness of drone activity allows pilots, communications specialists, and responding agencies to make informed decisions regarding takeoff, routing, approach, hover operations, landing, and patient movement.

Routine Drone Awareness Program Requirements

IAMTCS recommends that every air medical communication center establish a routine drone awareness program that includes, at minimum:

- A standard dispatch screening question:

"Are you aware of any drone activity at the scene?"

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This question should be incorporated into routine 911 call intake whenever drone activity could reasonably affect an air medical response.

- A documented helipad drone-sighting response procedure that defines:
    - Immediate notification requirements
    - Initial scene assessment
    - Communication with responding flight crews
    - Coordination with local agencies
- Clearly defined local escalation pathways whenever drone activity may affect:
    - Aircraft launch
    - Landing
    - Hover operations
    - Patient loading or unloading
- Education emphasizing that drone awareness procedures are practical aviation safety measures designed to improve shared situational awareness—not restrictions on lawful drone operations.

Implementation Recommendations

IAMTCS recommends that all communication centers, requesting agencies, hospitals, and organizations responsible for helipad operations:

- Incorporate the standard drone-awareness screening question into dispatch and call-intake protocols whenever it may affect an air medical response.
- Develop, implement, and document helipad drone-sighting response procedures, including notification processes, operational coordination, and escalation pathways.
- Integrate drone awareness into:
    - Initial communications specialist education
    - Annual competency training

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  - Quality assurance programs
  - Continuing education initiatives
- Document adoption of these practices through each organization's learning management system, training records, or other verifiable educational documentation.

Benefits of Routine Drone Awareness

Routine drone awareness improves operational safety by:

- Enhancing situational awareness for communications specialists and flight crews.
- Reducing avoidable conflicts between crewed and uncrewed aircraft.
- Supporting informed launch, routing, and landing decisions.
- Improving coordination between communications centers, pilots, requesting agencies, and public safety partners.
- Promoting consistent industry practices across medical transport programs.
- Strengthening aviation safety without unnecessarily delaying patient care or restricting lawful drone operations.

Conclusion

Routine drone awareness has become an essential component of safe air medical communications.

Establishing a standardized screening question, documented response procedures, and consistent communication practices improves shared situational awareness and helps reduce avoidable operational risk for patients, flight crews, communications specialists, and partner agencies.

As unmanned aircraft continue to become a permanent part of the National Airspace System, communication centers must adapt their operational practices accordingly. Routine drone awareness should be viewed as a fundamental element of modern medical

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transport communications, just as weather awareness, NOTAMs, and airspace coordination are today.

IAMTCS urges all organizations to adopt these standards as part of a comprehensive safety-centered communications model that protects patients, flight crews, communications specialists, and the communities they serve while preserving the integrity of the mission.

References

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