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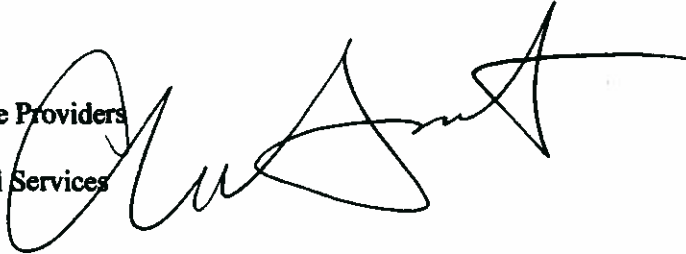
C. Earl Hunter, Commissioner

Promoting and protecting the health of the public and the environment.

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MEMORANDUM

TO: All SC Licensed Air Ambulance Providers
FROM: Alonzo W. Smith, Director
Division of Emergency Medical Services
DATE: September 7, 2006
RE: Helicopter "Shopping"



It has come to the attention of the Department that the Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) has identified "helicopter shopping" as a contributing factor in several fatal helicopter EMS (HEMS) accidents.

"Helicopter shopping" refers to the practice of calling, in sequence, various operators until an operator agrees to take a flight assignment, without sharing with subsequent operators the reasons the flight was declined by the previously called operators.

For example, an EMS dispatch center might call an air ambulance operator for a transport, and the operator turns the flight down for some reason such as weather conditions, aircraft capabilities, maintenance issues, etc. Subsequent calls are then made to other operators, each made without mentioning the previous refusals until an operator, unaware of the reasons for the previous refusals, and therefore, unaware of the complete situation, agrees to accept the flight assignment.

The practice of "helicopter shopping" can lead to an unsafe condition in which an operator initiates a flight that they would have declined if they had been aware of all of the facts surrounding the assignment, as was the case in several fatal HEMS accidents.

It is recognized that the refusal of one operator may indeed have nothing to do with another operator's determination to accept or refuse an assignment. Such as refusal due to mechanical problems with the aircraft, etc. However, only the entity capable of determining whether a previously called operator's refusal has any bearing on accepting a flight assignment is the operator which is currently receiving the request. Therefore, even when the dispatcher believes an operator's refusal is based on an operator-specific consideration, the reason for the refusal should be known to the subsequently called operator(s).

Therefore, the Department is requesting that your dispatch center develop a procedure that ensures that, after an EMS dispatcher has been refused a flight assignment, subsequently called operators are to be made aware of the circumstances surrounding the first (or subsequent) operator's refusal(s). Rather than have the dispatcher attempt to determine if the reason(s) for refusal are material to subsequently called operators, EMS dispatchers should pass along the reason(s) for refusal in all subsequent requests to operators for the affected flight request. This will ensure that the best decisions are made at the operator level and that only flight assignments that can be conducted safely will be accepted.

Thank you for your prompt consideration and implementation of this matter.

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