

# TO FLY OR NOT TO FLY



## SUMMARY

In San Luis Obispo County, ambulances are dispatched by a central Sheriff's operation upon receiving a request for medical assistance. The 2008-2009 Grand Jury reviewed the process by which these Emergency Medical Services are provided in San Luis Obispo County. For some rural areas, the county policy calls for the immediate dispatch of an air ambulance if certain medical criteria are met. The policies in use to coordinate air ambulance services were found to be lacking and in need of revision.

## METHOD

The Grand Jury investigation included:

- Interview with Arroyo Grande Fire Department
- Interviews with San Luis Obispo County Sheriff's Dispatch staff
- Interviews with San Luis Obispo Cal Fire staff
- Interviews with Cal Star Ambulance Service staff
- Toured San Luis Obispo Sheriff's Dispatch station

- Toured Cal Star Ambulance station
- Reviewed policies governing air and land ambulances (Policies 119, 104, 122, 125 and 201)
- Reviewed event response logs and independent detailed reports of medical calls

## **NARRATIVE**

Medical calls through San Luis Obispo County Sheriff's Dispatch from January 1, 2008 to April 30, 2009 totaled 29,820. From these calls Cal Star Ambulance Service transported patients 16 times and California Highway Patrol or other helicopter operations transported 10 times. During this time period Cal Star was dispatched 48 times with the 16 transports and 31 cancellations and 1 refusal to land. The CHP helicopter was dispatched 44 times with 10 transports and 34 cancellations.

Policy 119, adopted by the San Luis Obispo Emergency Medical Service Agency, Inc., describes the criteria for expedited launch. Expedited launch refers to the practice of dispatching an air ambulance as soon as a call is confirmed, before the first land-based responders are on the scene. The air ambulance would be recalled if information developed that the air transport was not needed. There would be no cost to a patient or other parties for a recalled flight. Policy 119 lists 11 medical conditions (see Attachment 1), one of which must prevail before an expedited launch occurs. It should be noted that chest pains, heart attacks and strokes are not presently included in the expedited launch criteria.

The policy calls for expedited launch zones for four rural areas, describing them verbally. The policy has some important deficiencies and ambiguities. A detailed map of these described areas (zones) does not exist. An important provision in defining expedited launch zones refers to the intersection of Nacimiento Lake Drive and Las Tablas Road. These roads in fact do not intersect. Another describes an area "beyond" a rural intersection, but does not indicate which direction is intended.

The operations committee of the San Luis Obispo Emergency Medical Service Agency Inc. (EMSA) is currently reviewing and updating Policy 119.

## **CONCLUSION**

The 11 Criteria for Expedited Launch included in Policy 119, Appendix A to this report, do not include chest pains, heart attack or stroke. The Expedited Launch Zones as described in Appendix B to this report are confusing, ambiguous and in one case wrong. The lack of clarity on launch zones may be an explanation for the limited number of expedited launches.

## **FINDINGS**

1. Policy 119 does not contain chest pain, heart attacks or strokes as reasons for an expedited launch.
2. There is no official detailed map of the expedited launch zones.
3. Some of the language describing expedited launch zone area in Policy 119 is not accurate.

## **RECOMMENDATIONS**

1. Review and update medical criteria for expedited launch zones. (San Luis Obispo Emergency Medical Service Agency Inc.)
2. Redefine launch zone locations in detail so they can be understood. (San Luis Obispo Emergency Medical Service Agency Inc.)
3. Produce an official, accurate and detailed map of expedited launch zones. (San Luis Obispo Emergency Medical Service Agency Inc.)
4. Provide oversight of Policy 119 that assures provisions on expedited launch zones are followed. (San Luis Obispo Sheriff's Department)

## REQUIRED RESPONSES

**San Luis Obispo Emergency Medical Service Agency Inc.** is required to respond to Findings 1, 2, and 3 and Recommendations 1, 2, and 3. The responses shall be submitted to the Presiding Judge at the San Luis Obispo Superior court by August 24, 2009. Please provide a copy of all responses to the Grand Jury as well.

**San Luis Obispo County Sheriff's Department** is required to respond to Finding 3 and Recommendation 4. The responses shall be submitted to the Presiding Judge at the San Luis Obispo Superior court by August 24, 2009. Please provide a copy of all responses to the Grand Jury as well.

The mailing addresses for delivery are:

| Presiding Judge                                                                                                     | Grand Jury                                                                      |
|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Presiding Judge Martin Tangeman<br>Superior Court of California<br>1035 Palm, Room 385<br>San Luis Obispo, CA 93408 | San Luis Obispo County Grand Jury<br>P.O. Box 4910<br>San Luis Obispo, CA 93403 |

## **APPENDIX A**

### **CRITERIA FOR EXPEDITED LAUNCH**

An EMS helicopter will be dispatched by Med-Com without specific request to the following Expedited Launch Zones when the emergency includes one or more of the following criteria:

1. Rollover with ejected victims
2. High-speed MVA or head-on collision
3. Fatalities in the same vehicle as the injured
4. Multiple victims (5 or more) or multi-casualty incident (to facilitate transport)
5. Vehicle v. pedestrian with significant injuries
6. Automobile accidents with extrications, entrapments and/or difficult access for ground ambulance
7. Unconscious victims
8. Burns to face or major portions of the body.
9. GSW to trunk, head, or neck
10. Amputations and/or mangled limbs
11. Patients located in remote areas resulting in a prolonged transport times or risk of injury to first responders. (rescue and hoist situations)

## **APPENDIX B**

### **EXPEDITED LAUNCH ZONES**

#### **North Coast:**

- o Areas on SR 1 north of the Piedras Blancas lighthouse
- o Areas east of the SR 1 and SR 46 intersection to Jack Creek Road
- o Remote coastal mountain locations to the east of SR 1

#### **Central Coast:**

- o The Morro Bay sand spit and the remote areas of Montana de Oro State Park

#### **South County:**

- o Pismo Dunes past mile marker 10
- o Areas on SR 166 east of Rock Front Ranch
- o Remote mountain locations to the east of Lopez Lake

#### **North County:**

- o Areas on SR 46 east of the Shandon rest area
- o California Valley and the surrounding remote areas
- o Nacimiento Lake - areas the north of Nacimiento Lake Dr. from the intersection of Las Tablas Rd.
- o Nacimiento Lake Area:
  - Those areas served by Nacimiento Lake Dr. north and east of the Dam
  - Those areas beyond the intersection of Chimney Rock Rd. and Cypress Mountain Rd.