


FAIRFAX COUNTY POLICE DEPARTMENT  GENERAL ORDER	SUBJECT: POLICE HELICOPTER OPERATIONS	NUMBER: 532
	EFFECTIVE DATE: August 11, 2022	REVIEW: August, 2025
RESPONSIBLE ENTITY: OPERATIONS SUPPORT BUREAU		<input type="checkbox"/> New Directive <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Replaces: 530.2 <input type="checkbox"/> Revised:
ACCREDITATION STANDARDS	CALEA: VLEPSC:	

I. PURPOSE

The purpose of this General Order is to establish guidelines and procedures for the use of the Department helicopter.

II. POLICY

It is the policy of the Fairfax County Police Department (FCPD) to utilize Department helicopters as aerial platforms to support ongoing police operations. The overall operational success of the Helicopter Division is contingent upon effective coordination between air and ground units, and their working knowledge of helicopter operational procedures. In terms of operations, medical evacuations for life-threatening situations shall remain the highest priority, followed by ground operations to assist in ongoing criminal investigations and missing individuals whenever the circumstances call for aerial support.

III. DEFINITIONS

- A. Confined Area: An area where the flight of the helicopter is limited in some direction by terrain or the presence of obstructions that are either natural or man-made. As an example, a clearing in the woods, city street, road, building roof, etc. can be classified as a confined area.
- B. Flight Crew: The crew members who are assigned to a helicopter during a tour of duty. This will generally be a pilot and two flight officers.
- C. Flight Officer: Crew member who functions as a police observer and paramedic.
- D. Landing Zone (LZ): Any area designated as a location for the helicopter to land.

- E. Medical Control: The senior physician on-duty at the destination hospital emergency department, or appropriate designee.
- F. National Capital Region (NCR): The District of Columbia; Prince Georges and Montgomery Counties in Maryland; Arlington, Fairfax, Loudoun, and Prince William Counties in Virginia; and all cities and towns included within the outer boundaries of the foregoing counties.
- G. Pilot-In-Command: The designation for the pilot who is in command of the helicopter during actual operations. If there are two pilots in the helicopter, only one acts as pilot-in-command.
- H. Visual Flight Rules (VFR): Regulations under which a pilot operates an aircraft in weather conditions generally clear enough to allow the pilot to see where the aircraft is going.
- I. Visual Meteorological Conditions (VMC): An aviation flight category in which visual flight rules (VFR) flight is permitted—that is, conditions in which pilots have sufficient visibility to fly the aircraft maintaining visual separation from terrain and other aircraft.

IV. GENERAL RESPONSIBILITIES

- A. **Requests for Helicopter Support**: All requests for helicopter support should be coordinated through an on-duty supervisor. This does not prevent any officer assigned to a crime in progress, a crime recently committed, or attempting to expeditiously locate an individual or critical item of evidence and reasonably believes the helicopter may directly benefit them, from requesting the helicopter to respond to the general location to assist police operations.
- B. **Radio Communications**: Supervisors and officers who request the assistance of the Helicopter Division shall make their request through the Department of Public Safety Communications (DPSC) and note the location and type of the ongoing incident as well as any specific service or equipment necessary.
- C. **Safety Procedures**: No individuals, to include police officers, shall approach the helicopter while it is in operation unless specifically requested by the pilot or flight officer. Whenever requested to approach the helicopter, officers shall only do so from the front of the aircraft. Under no circumstances should any individual approach the helicopter from the tail area, or cross from side-to-side under the tail boom of the aircraft. All personnel who approach the aircraft shall maintain observation of the pilot for any additional instructions

they may convey. Unless otherwise directed, only the flight officer shall be responsible for opening and closing the aircraft doors during operations.

D. **DPSC Responsibilities:** DPSC will provide the following information to police officers and supervisors whenever requested:

1. Up-to-date status on the availability of police helicopters.
2. Relay requests and relevant information to the helicopter crew, to include out-of-county requests reviewed through the acting Duty Officer and/or Police Liaison Commander (PLC). Once DPSC has notified the crew of the request for helicopter assistance, the crew shall provide DPSC with an estimated time of arrival to the scene, to include out-of-county requests.
3. Restrict radio transmissions during critical phases of helicopter missions, with the exception of relaying LZ information and mission critical information.
4. Pre-alert the flight crew when an incident may potentially require the use of the helicopter (ex: major crimes, serious accidents, pursuits).

D. **Helicopter Pilot:** The helicopter pilot-in-command shall have sole responsibility for the safe operation of the helicopter at all times per Federal Aviation Regulations, to include the ability to terminate a mission at any point. Should the pilot abort a mission, the crew shall notify DPSC of the reason(s) for termination.

E. **Helicopter Flight Officer:** In addition to their regular duties, the helicopter flight officer shall direct personnel in and around the helicopter whenever it is located on the ground. No individual may approach the helicopter until directed to do so by the flight officer. During medevac operations, the flight officer shall direct patient loading and unloading and designate assisting individuals.

F. **Record-Keeping:** The Helicopter Division shall be responsible for maintaining a database of records to include the number of medical evacuations, requests for service, mission details, hours flown, and other pertinent data relevant to helicopter operations.

V. **OPERATIONAL PROCEDURES**

A. **Mission Priorities:** With limited exceptions, missions shall be conducted in following priorities:

1. Medical emergencies within Fairfax County.
 2. Police emergencies within Fairfax County.
 3. Medical emergencies outside of Fairfax County.
 4. Police emergencies outside of Fairfax County.
 5. Routine police missions within Fairfax County.
 6. Non-emergency missions outside of Fairfax County.
- B. **Helicopter Response:** The Helicopter Division's standard is to select response over non-response on calls for service originating from police supervisors. When requesting the helicopter, police supervisors should ensure that the call for service warrants the effective use of air support. Time lapse, extent of suspect lookout information, vehicle information, likelihood of apprehension, and in some cases, confirmation of a crime or incident are all factors for consideration.
- C. **Inclement Weather:** The Helicopter Division has specific weather minimums within its own Operational SOP that the pilot in command shall abide by. These minimums are selected based upon FAA regulations and geography of the County and surrounding area. In order to provide a safe and effective platform, the helicopter must operate VMC under VFR.
- D. **Use of Other Agency Aircraft:** In order to ensure the safety of other agency flight crews, whenever the helicopter is out of service due to weather, police supervisors and/or DPSC shall not seek assistance from other agency helicopters unless the on-duty pilot in command has been consulted.
- E. **Mission Restrictions:** The following restrictions apply to use of the helicopter:
1. The helicopter may not be used to transport violent or mentally ill individuals who pose any potential safety risk to the crew.
 2. Due to the noise emitted from the helicopter, some non-essential nighttime operations in residential areas may preempt use of the helicopter.
 3. Where multiple police emergencies exist within Fairfax County, the Duty Officer shall determine which event the helicopter shall respond to based upon the totality of the known facts and circumstances.
- F. **Motor Vehicle Pursuits:** In accordance with [FCPD General Order 504](#), Vehicle Pursuits, the helicopter may respond at the request of DPSC to provide aerial surveillance of the pursuit. Whenever doing so, the helicopter crew shall assume primary radio responsibilities once overhead of the pursuit, if feasible. Once the fleeing vehicle is identified, the crew shall notify the

controlling pursuit supervisor who may elect to terminate the pursuit depending upon the totality of the known facts and circumstances.

1. **Restrictions:** All potentially unsafe conditions (ex: pursuit is approaching stopped traffic, red lights, school zones) shall be relayed by the helicopter crew to pursuing officers via the police radio in an expeditious manner. Whenever the helicopter is approaching restricted air space, or any other area the helicopter is not permitted to fly while following a pursuit, officers may be required to continue the pursuit without the aerial assistance of the helicopter. The helicopter may also be required to withdraw from a pursuit whenever a medical emergency within Fairfax County occurs that necessitates the assistance of the helicopter.

G. **Helicopter and Police Vehicle Communications:** Officers who are actively communicating with the flight crew and are in visual contact with the aircraft may use their assigned cruiser numbers, when clearly displayed on the vehicle's roof, as opposed to their assigned field designator. This procedure should be utilized for motor vehicle pursuits, crime scenes, accidents, and any other situation where the flight crew can visually and direct officers.

H. **Administrative Requests:** Requests for helicopter transport or services by any County agency other than the Fairfax County Police and/or Fire and Rescue Departments are subject to the approval of the Helicopter Division Commander or their designee to ensure compliance with Homeland Security flight restrictions.

I. **Video Recordings:** When appropriate and feasible, the helicopter crew should make a video and audio recording of the pursuit and any post-pursuit actions. All recordings shall be retained in accordance with the current provisions of the [Library of Virginia, Records Retention and Disposal Schedule](#).

1. **Duplications:** Duplications of video footage for training purposes, official police duties, or court purposes is permissible with the approval of the Helicopter Division Commander, or if unavailable, the OSB Commander. All requests for release, either internally or externally, shall be documented.
2. **General Public Release:** Requests of video copies for release to the general public shall be coordinated through the Public Affairs Bureau (PAB) Director in accordance with [FCPD General Order 402](#), Release of Information.

3. **Administrative Investigations:** Requests for helicopter recordings as part of any administrative investigation shall be made via the investigating supervisor to the Helicopter Division Commander or their designee.

VI. LANDING ZONES

- A. **Establishment of Landing Zones (LZ):** Where a helicopter landing is required, officers shall establish a safe LZ and a designated officer on the ground shall relay all pertinent information to the helicopter crew. Assisting officers shall control ingress of vehicular traffic and by-standers as applicable, and maintain direct communications with the helicopter crew during the landing phase to observe the approach and relay any required corrections via the police radio in a timely manner.
- B. Minimum requirements to establish a LZ are as follows:
 1. **Size:** 30 yards by 30 yards, completely clear of obstructions.
 2. **Surface:** Surfaces should be completely free of loose debris (ex: gravel, trash, other materials). Hard surfaces, to include concrete, asphalt, hard earth/grass are preferred.
 3. **Slope:** LZ slopes must be gradual and never exceed ten (10) degrees.
 4. **Obstructions:** Officers establishing a LZ must physically check a 200-yard approach and departure path for any obstructions potentially hazardous to flight. Officers should be mindful that clearly visible obstructions on the ground may not be visible from the air (ex: utility wires). Ground units shall immediately relay the presence of any hazardous obstructions, to specifically include overhead wires, to the helicopter crew.
 5. **Marking:** The LZ may be marked at night through the use of police vehicles, utilized low beam headlights only. Police vehicles may utilize their emergency lights until the helicopter crew acknowledges that they have located the LZ. Due to the use of night-vision goggles by the helicopter crew, all officers directly adjacent to a LZ shall ensure their emergency lights are de-activated to avoid blinding the crew, and shall never direct their cruiser spotlights at the helicopter. Where the helicopter crew has difficulty locating the LZ, one flashlight may be used to attract the crew's attention.

6. **Scene Control:** No individual or vehicle shall be permitted within 50 feet of the helicopter unless specifically directed by a crew member.
7. **School Property:** The use of school property for a LZ is strictly prohibited unless (1) the landing is necessary for an ongoing public safety emergency or (2) prior approval has been granted by the School Division Superintendent. Where any emergency landing on school property occurs, the flight officer shall immediately notify DPSC, who will then alert the Operations Support Bureau (OSB) Commander or Duty Officer, and the Fairfax County Public Schools Security Department.
8. **Other Landing Zones:** Urban, open spaces (ex: County parks, parking lots) should be primarily used for non-emergency LZs. The use of hospital helicopter pads should be restricted to medical-related missions only unless prior permission has been granted by the controlling hospital.

VII. SPECIALIZED EQUIPMENT

A. The helicopter crew is equipped with the following specialized equipment:

1. **Infrared Cameras/Night-Vision:** The helicopter is equipped with a thermographic camera that senses infrared radiation. Sensors installed in infrared cameras, detect infrared radiation, typically emitted from a heat source to create an image assembled for video output.
2. **Night Vision Goggles:** Helicopter crew members are each equipped with helmet mounted night vision goggles to assist with nighttime operations where there is little or no ambient light.
3. **Search Light:** The helicopter is equipped with a steerable searchlight that can be used for illumination of various events.
4. **Rescue Equipment:** The helicopter has access to rescue sticks which provide rapid flotation assistance to an individual at risk of drowning. Rescue sticks may be deployed from the aircraft and inflate rapidly once contact is made with water. Where it is anticipated that a mission may involve a water rescue the flight crew should be pre-alerted prior to departure in order to load rescue sticks on board the aircraft.

VIII. OTHER JURISDICTION REQUESTS

- A. **Request Procedures:** FCPD helicopters may be made available to other jurisdictions per mutual aid agreements under the following procedures:

1. Operational requests shall be made via telephone or police radio through DPSC by the requesting agency. DPSC will notify an on-duty Helicopter Division supervisor of the request if it occurs during normal working hours.
 - a. **Adjacent Requests:** After 1700 hours and on weekends, the Duty Officer will be notified of the request if it originates from a jurisdiction directly adjacent to Fairfax County. The Duty Officer will confer with the on-duty flight crew and determine whether or not the request will be granted.
 - b. **Non-Adjacent Requests:** For non-adjacent jurisdiction requests, the on-duty helicopter crew shall be notified and consulted, who will confer with the on-call Helicopter Division supervisor for final approval.
2. Requesting jurisdictions shall be notified via telephone or mutual aid radio by the flight crew regarding the status of their request. Upon completion of any mission outside Fairfax County, the flight crew shall notify DPSC when they return to service within Fairfax County.
3. All requests for administrative use of a helicopter outside of Fairfax County shall be conditioned upon approval of the Chief of Police or their designee.

IX. DISASTER PLANS

- A. **Mutual Aid Requests:** Assistance to other Northern Virginia jurisdictions shall occur only after proper notification from the requesting agency has been made, depending upon availability and ability to accomplish the mission.
- B. **Council of Governments Disaster Plan:** Where a helicopter is available and is capable of accomplishing the mission, the Council of Governments Disaster Plan shall be followed.

General Order 532 becomes effective on the above date and rescinds all previous rules and regulations pertaining to the subjects.

ISSUED BY:

APPROVED BY:



Chief of Police



County Executive