

Colorado Air Medical Services Promote Safe Flying by Sharing Weather Information

By Daniel Casciato

Air medical programs in Colorado recently implemented a cooperative system among all flight operators that shares information between dispatch centers whenever a transport is turned down or aborted because of bad weather.

Colorado's combination of changing weather patterns and unique topography occasionally makes it challenging to transport critical patients by air. The air medical programs in the state and surrounding areas know that information is important to safe transport.

They also know that monopolizing that information can be fatal. During a safety summit Webcast in January 2006, the National Transportation Safety Board (NTSB) identified withholding information as a major barrier to safe air medical operations. That concern was highlighted in February when an air medical helicopter in Indiana crashed after embarking on a flight that two other programs had rejected because of poor weather. In that accident, all three crew members were critically injured, and a home into which the helicopter crashed was destroyed.

Colorado's air medical programs, including AIRLIFE Denver, Care Flight Durango, Care Flight Grand Junction, AirLife Greeley and Flight For Life Colorado, knew that withholding critical weather-related information was a problem even before the NTSB released its findings about air medical safety concerns. Late last year, at a bimonthly meeting of the Colorado Advanced Transport Committee, a forum that facilitates collaboration among Colorado's air medical programs, the flight operators agreed to begin sharing vital weather information between communications centers. In other words, when one manager decided that weather conditions were too risky to fly, he or she agreed to share that information with all of the other air medical programs in the state. The new program is called Colorado Weather SAFE Alert.

Broadcasting via Pagers

At first, the psychological and technical challenges of getting everyone communicating was "a little daunting," admitted AIRLIFE Communication Manager Mike Morgan, who coordinated the effort. "But I knew that we were improving not just our safety, but everybody's safety, which was a great inspiration. It has been extremely rewarding to know that we have made a difference."

Morgan explained that each air medical program agreed to purchase an alphanumeric pager that is capable of nationwide pages.

Then, if a flight program turns down or aborts a flight because of bad weather, this information is called into a communications center, which broadcasts it to the other programs via a group page.

"Not everyone came on board immediately," explained AIRLIFE Denver Program Director Jana Williams, RN.

"Some needed to be persuaded that it was not going to be used in a punitive way."

"We all recognize that there are times that weather may impede a program on one side but not another program on the other side of a call," she added. "So the intent is not to forbid programs from taking flights that others turn down; it is to arm all programs in the area with the information so that they can make better choices."

Regional Interest

Since the program began in February 2006, Morgan has received inquiries from flight programs in Flagstaff, Arizona, and Casper, Wyoming, expressing interest in participating.

"We also got calls from programs in

neighboring states that fly into Colorado that asked to be included as well," Williams said. "We are in the process of getting them linked into the system."

Both Williams and Morgan report that they are "very pleased with the results" of the program thus far. "It has been extremely successful, and I know that my program has already turned down a flight

based on information relayed via this pager," Williams said.

Withholding information is a major barrier to safe air medical operations.

Simple but Effective

For air medical programs that want to try something similar in their states, Williams offered this advice. "Get the group together so that they all understand

the mission and can agree on an implementation plan," she advised. "Also, it's important to understand that it doesn't mean you can't take a flight after someone else turns it down, you just have more information to make an informed decision."

As for any changes planned to the system in the future, Williams said, "We are working on a tracking log so that we can evaluate the benefits in more concrete terms, and we'd love to see it expand to all our neighboring states. Ideally, I believe this could be implemented on a regional level across the nation. The way I see it, if we can prevent one accident or incident, it will be time and money well spent."

Williams said she is thrilled that others are taking the time to learn about Colorado Weather SAFE Alert. "I believe it to be a best practice and a great example of how we can all work together for a common good," she said. 