February 2007

AVIATION SAFETY

Improved Data Collection Needed for Effective Oversight of Air Ambulance Industry

GAO Accountability · Integrity · Reliability

Highlights

Highlights of GAO-07-353, a report to the Chairman, Subcommittee on Aviation, Committee on Transportation and Infrastructure, House of Representatives

Why GAO Did This Study

Air ambulance transport is widely regarded as improving the chances of survival for trauma victims and other critical patients. However, in recent years, the number of air ambulance accidents has led to increased industry scrutiny by government agencies, the public, the media, and the industry itself. The Federal Aviation Administration (FAA), which provides safety oversight, has been called upon by the National Transportation Safety Board (NTSB) and others to issue more stringent safety requirements for the industry.

GAO's study addressed (1) recent trends in the air ambulance industry, (2) FAA's challenges in providing safety oversight, and (3) FAA's efforts to address the challenges and what is known about the effects of these efforts. To address these issues, we analyzed FAA, NTSB, and industry data, interviewed federal and industry officials, and conducted five site visits, among other things.

What GAO Recommends

GAO recommends that FAA (1) identify the data necessary to better understand the air ambulance industry and develop a systematic approach for gathering and using this data and (2) collect information to evaluate the effectiveness of voluntary FAA guidance. DOT agreed with our findings and conclusions, and agreed to consider our recommendations.

www.gao.gov/cgi-bin/getrpt?GAO-07-353.

To view the full product, including the scope and methodology, click on the link above. For more information, contact Gerald L. Dillingham, Ph.D., at (202) 512-2834 or dillinghamg@gao.gov.

What GAO Found

From 1998 to 2005, the air ambulance industry grew, largely in stand-alone (independent) operations, and experienced an increased number of accidents, resulting in added industry efforts to improve safety. Although there are few data on the industry's basic aspects, available data show increased numbers of helicopters and base stations between 2003 and 2005. Most of the base-station growth has been at airports and stand-alone helipads rather than hospital-based locations, a strong indication of the shift to stand-alone operations. The annual number of accidents increased from 1998 to 2003 but declined in 2004 and 2005. The decline may reflect added industry safety efforts, such as the creation of a study group that recommends best practices. However, the lack of actual flight-hour data prevents calculation of the industry's accident rate, making it difficult to determine whether the industry has become more or less safe.

FAA's main challenge in providing safety oversight for air ambulances is that its oversight approach is not geared toward air ambulance operations. For example, FAA uses the same set of regulations to oversee air ambulance operations as it uses to oversee other air taxi services. Air ambulance flights are subject to greater risks than other helicopter operations because they often fly at night, in a variety of weather conditions, and to remote sights to provide medical attention. These transports also can involve multiple medical and aviation officials, increasing the potential for human error. The broad nature of the applicable regulations further inhibits FAA oversight because they may not fully address the potential risks air ambulance operations face.

FAA has initiated many efforts to strengthen its oversight of air ambulances but does not evaluate the effectiveness of its efforts. FAA's efforts include establishing a task force to review air ambulance accidents, plans for hiring additional staff to oversee large operators, and issuing guidance to inspectors and operators promoting various safety practices. However, FAA does not track implementation of its voluntary guidance. Also, FAA cannot measure basic industry trends, such as accident rate changes. Measuring these trends requires actual flight-hour data, which FAA does not currently collect. Without this data, FAA cannot know if its efforts are achieving their intended results.

Air Ambulance Helicopter

Source: Clare McLean © 2006.