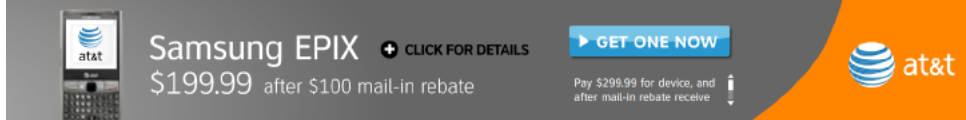


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4 killed in helicopter crash in Chicago suburb

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Workers remove one of four bodies from the wreckage of a medical evacuation helicopter crash in Aurora, Ill. Thursday. By Paul Beatty, AP

AURORA, Ill. (AP) — A medical helicopter carrying a 1-year-old patient crashed and burned in a wooded area of suburban Chicago overnight, killing all four aboard. The aircraft apparently clipped a radio tower, and authorities investigated Thursday whether the tower's lights had been on.

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It was the sixth fatal crash involving medical helicopters this year, according to federal data, including one just last month in Maryland that also killed four.

SAFETY: Medevac helicopters under scrutiny

The helicopter carrying 1-year-old Kirstin Blockinger of Leland was headed for Children's Memorial Hospital in Chicago from Valley West Hospital in Sandwich when it went down minutes before midnight Wednesday, Aurora police spokesman Sgt. Rob Wallers said.

John Brannen of the National Transportation Safety Board said the helicopter apparently clipped the radio tower support wire before the crash. A snapped wire hung from the 734-foot tower, which stands across a busy road from the crash site.

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Brannen said the helicopter was flying about 50 feet below the top of the tower when the wire was clipped. He said NTSB was investigating whether lights on the tower were on at the time or could have been knocked out during the incident.

"I can say that when I was out here last night after the accident that the lights on the tower were not lit," Brannen said Thursday.

Authorities said engineers were evaluating the tower's stability. No one on the ground was hurt.

Children's Memorial Hospital spokeswoman Julie Pesch said the child was being moved about 50 miles from Sandwich to Chicago after a closer hospital had no room for her there.

Eva Blockinger, 89, said Kirstin was her great-granddaughter and told The Associated Press that the girl was often ill and suffered from seizures.

"She was in and out of the hospital a lot," Blockinger said. "It was a regular occurrence."

Waller said the helicopter belonged to Air Angels Inc., an emergency medical transport service based in suburban Bolingbrook.

Air Angels CEO Jim Adams told reporters the helicopter's crew consisted of the pilot, a nurse and a paramedic. The pilot did not report mechanical problems, and weather was not an issue, he said.

Air Angels identified the pilot as Del Waugh, 69, who had worked for the service since July 2006. Also killed were paramedic Ronald Battiatto, 41, and nurse William Mann, 31.

Waugh showed off an Air Angels helicopter to crowds at a Chicago-area safety fair last year, explaining that a main concern when landing is utility wires, trees, towers and other obstacles, the Daily Herald of Arlington Heights reported at the time.

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MEDICAL HELICOPTER CRASHES

A look at recent fatal accidents involving medical helicopters:

- **Oct. 15, 2008:** A helicopter carrying a 1-year-old patient crashed after clipping a wire to a radio tower, killing her and all three crewmembers.
- **Sept. 28, 2008:** A medical helicopter carrying victims of a traffic accident went down in a suburban Washington, D.C., park, killing four of the five people on board. The survivor was one of the traffic-accident victims.
- **June 29, 2008:** A fiery collision killed seven people aboard two medical helicopters arriving with patients at Flagstaff Medical Center in Arizona. The aircraft collided in a wooded area about a half-mile from the hospital.
- **June 8, 2008:** A medical helicopter agreed to pick up a patient in Huntsville, Texas, in the early morning darkness after a Life Flight crew abandoned the mission. The Bell 407 helicopter crashed in Sam Houston National Forest, killing the patient, pilot, paramedic and nurse.
- **May 10, 2008:** A University of Wisconsin Hospital Med Flight helicopter dropped off a patient in La Crosse, Wis., and then crashed shortly after it took off on its return flight to Madison, killing the surgeon, nurse and pilot on board.
- **Feb. 5, 2008:** A medical helicopter crashed during a trip to South Padre Island, Texas, to pick up a patient. No patient was aboard but the pilot and two medics were killed.

• Dec. 10, 2006: A medical helicopter crashed northeast of Los Angeles, killing the pilot and two crewmembers. No patients were on board. The chopper was en route to its base in Victorville, Calif., from Loma Linda Medical Center. A combination of pilot error and weather conditions were to blame, according to the NTSB.

• May 30, 2006: A medical helicopter in Washington, D.C., crashed after aborting a landing at a hospital, killing the patient and injuring three crewmembers. Pilot error caused the accident, the NTSB said.

Sources: The Associated Press and National Transportation Safety Board.

The girl was initially to go to Central DuPage Hospital in Winfield, but its pediatric intensive care unit was full. That would have required a shorter helicopter trip, but the crash occurred before the helicopter would have reached either hospital.

On Sept. 28, a medical helicopter carrying traffic accident victims crashed in a Maryland suburb, killing four of the five people on board. On June 8, a copter crashed on an isolated ranch in the Sam Houston National Forest in Texas, killing a patient and three crewmembers. Those and other crashes have raised questions on whether medical ambulance flights are overused.

A January 2003 crash that killed an Air Angels pilot was blamed on pilot error and weather problems. Mechanical problems were blamed for an August 2007 forced landing, but no one was hurt.

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