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Stacey Friedman of El Dorado Hills lost her sister Erin Reed, a nurse, in a medical helicopter crash in 2005. She is in Washington D.C. to meet with federal officials and others on making medical air transport flights safer.

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IF they send the helicopter yo better get on it. Recently in Eldorado county on Hwy 50 they summoned the helicopter for a car accident. The injured refused to get on it saying he wan't that injured. The police promptly forced him to take the flight. The injured wasn't happy about so in addition to having to pay for a helicopter flight he didn't need, he also was fortunate enough to be charged with resisting arrest. Nice revenue generater for all involved, except John Q Public.

-- jamiemmartin

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## Hearings to begin on safety of medical flights

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With air safety officials about to start four days of hearings into medical helicopter flights, Stacey Friedman of El Dorado Hills arrived in Washington D.C. on Sunday to take her place among the

relatives of the dead.

Those who loved the doctors, nurses, pilots and patients who died in flights that were intended to save lives are scheduled to meet with federal officials today, in advance of the National Transportation Safety Board hearings.

Their goal: legislation that would make air medical transport safer.

"We've just gone through the absolutely worst year in the history of this industry. For the first time we have families really unified for change," said Friedman.

Friedman's sister Erin Reed, a nurse, died in an air helicopter crash into Puget Sound near Seattle in 2005.

Since then, Friedman has helped create an informal coalition of husbands and wives, parents and siblings who want better equipment and tougher flight regulations to be part of future air medical flights.

Such rules would affect not just people aboard air ambulances, but those who live under their flight paths or near busy helicopter landing pads.

"If you have a mid-air collision over a populated area, you're going to have a lot of collateral damage – people and buildings and destruction," Friedman said.

"No one wants that. We need to do a better job of dispatch, communication and coordination."

In the Sacramento region, pilots have reported at least three incidents with air medical flights that worried them in 2008, including two that required evasive action.

In May, a medical helicopter had to adjust its flight path to avoid a fire helicopter on a training flight near Sutter Roseville Medical Center. In August, a "near collision" indicator went off in a CHP helicopter as a medical helicopter came within a few hundred feet above a crash site on Highway 99 north of Sacramento.

And in October, medical helicopters jammed up in and around UC Davis Medical Center in the aftermath of a casino bus crash in Colusa County.

None of the episodes rose to the level of FAA-designated near misses, although each triggered anxious meetings afterward among helicopter operators and others.

Meanwhile, the region's medical air capabilities are growing, with a helicopter landing pad opening this fall at Kaiser's new trauma center in south Sacramento.

Another is scheduled to open in 2011 on the roof of an expanded Sutter medical complex at 29th and L streets in central Sacramento.

Already, UC Davis Medical Center averages 45 to 50 emergency landings a month on a rooftop site southeast of downtown Sacramento, and sometimes has as many as 30 more monthly flights that aren't emergencies.

To the north, Sutter Roseville averages about 44 helicopter landings a month.

Both pilots and Friedman have said that in general, California air medical flights are safe, but more could be done to make them safer.

Nationwide, 2008 was a perilous year for air ambulances, with crashes killing at least 25 people and prompting the NTSB hearings Tuesday.

Friedman and other relatives are lobbying for changes that include:

- Requiring "black box" recorders on all flights;
- Requiring terrain awareness systems on both fixed-wing and helicopter medical flights;
- Requiring flights made without patients on board to follow the same weather restrictions and other rules as flights carrying patients;
- Formalizing the steps to be taken before any departure to ensure that weather and other conditions are safe enough for flight;
- Improving dispatch and communications.

Those provisions are already in a pending Senate measure that would re-authorize Federal Aviation Administration funding. But relatives of flight victims plan to work this week on getting similar legislation introduced in the House, to improve the chances of the legislation passing.

In California, pilots have been working informally in the Sacramento region and beyond to try to iron out communications problems, according to Graham Pierce, vice chairman of the California Association of Air Medical Services.

The air medical group has been urging hospitals to get more actively involved in tracking incoming and outgoing flights, and sharing that information with pilots.

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*Call The Bee's Carrie Peyton Dahlberg, (916) 321-1086.*

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**jamiemmartin** wrote on 02/03/2009 11:15:08 AM:

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**Daveyl** wrote on 02/02/2009 08:43:57 AM:

I believe these services are used in excess of the need. Yes, on occasion there are requirements for choppers, but the dispersal of trauma facilities prompts dispatchers to alert the pilots, not the immediate need for medical treatment. I remember a helicopter arriving at McClellan with an elderly patient who attempted suicide after the death of his wife. They flew all the way from Santa Rosa, claiming there were no other locations to transport their patient to. I just can't figure why such medical facilities are unavailable within a reasonable distance. The pilots are faily good 'Sticks' but the aspect of "You call, we haul" 24 hour service, along with the lack of trained ground personnel to properly designate the LZ and/or make weather evaluations creates hazardous conditions for any pilot to operate in.

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