

## Chattanooga: Air ambulance flights, crashes on the rise

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By:

[Jacqueline Koch \(Contact\)](#)

In the 21 years Roger Forgey has helped oversee Life Force, he's seen the air ambulance system grow from a rudimentary form of patient transport to an advanced, live-saving operation.

Those in the industry used to call helicopter programs "dust offs" because the helicopters flew in, dusted off a patient and got him to the nearest care center because they lacked capabilities to help patients en route to hospitals, said Mr. Forgey, Erlanger hospital's senior vice president for business development and regional operations.

Today, programs have high-tech equipment such as small ventilators to treat patients during the trip and navigational aids such as GPS systems, satellite tracking, terrain alert warning systems and weather tracking devices to help ensure their safe arrival at a hospital, Mr. Forgey said.

Still, technology can't make every air ambulance flight totally safe.

From 2002 to 2005, 55 air ambulance accidents occurred nationally, a figure that has risen steadily since the mid-1990s. A crash late Wednesday in a Chicago suburb was one of eight fatal air ambulance accidents this year, according to federal data. The crash in Aurora, Ill., killed four and came less than a month after a crash in suburban Washington killed four and left one in critical condition.

"That's the toughest part about seeing these crashes is because these standards that we fly by are much improved from the original," Mr. Forgey said.

service up

Authorities say the number of patients being transported via air ambulances has increased steadily, a trend seen at local hospitals. Erlanger, which previously owned Life Force, transported 1,719 patients via the service in 2005. It added a third helicopter to its fleet in February 2007, and from Jan. 1 to June 6 of this year, had transported 1,905 patients, hospital spokeswoman Pat Charles said. After that date Life Force was sold to Med Trans, an independently held company, she said.

Helicopters arriving at Memorial hospital, which installed a helipad two years ago, come from five different carriers — Air Evac, Life Force, Vanderbilt, UT LifeStar and Rescue Air One, officials said. Since October 2006, the hospital has had 218 helicopter landings.

The increase in services can be attributed to an aging population, the closure of emergency departments, hospitals and community-based ambulance services, and changes in rural health care, including its delivery and availability, said Reid Vogel, director of marketing and public relations for Med Trans.

### BY THE NUMBERS

#### National air ambulance crash numbers

8 — Air ambulance crashes to date in 2008

13 — Deaths from medical aircraft accidents in May and June 2008

14 — Air ambulance crashes in 2007

24 — Deaths resulting from air ambulance crashes in 2007

13 — Air ambulance crashes in 2006

10 — Deaths resulting from air ambulance crashes in 2006

Source: National Transportation Safety Board

Patients also are living longer immediately after accidents, thanks to improved car safety features, the expertise of emergency responders on the scene and the abilities of emergency crews to administer care to patients in a helicopter with items such as small ventilators, Mr. Forgey said.

“Patients that should have died 10 years ago don’t die today,” he said. “We have seat belts and airbags that make absolutely unsurvivable wrecks and accidents survivable.”

Tough terrain

While the Southeast Tennessee and Northwest Georgia regions have been spared the disasters seen in other parts of the nation, the region isn’t immune to challenging medical flights, Mr. Forgey said.

Crews deal with mountainous and heavily wooded terrain and hundreds of Tennessee Valley Authority power lines, he said.

Records show helicopters that crash generally do so for a few reasons, including bad weather and unknown or hard-to-see obstacles.

Changes in technology have helped crews be more prepared, Mr. Vogel said.

“Numerous aviation technologies have been refined and have become part of many air medical program operations,” he said.

Those include night vision goggles and enhanced vision systems, radar altimeters and traffic alert and collision avoidance systems, he said.

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