



FLIGHT FOLLOWING:

Safety When Seconds Count

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Flight following is crucial to safety in situations requiring pilots and crews to fly specific missions, such as search and rescue, air medical, firefighting, and law enforcement operations. Special operations missions by definition require focus that can cause distraction and a lack of situational awareness.

Flight following in visual flight rules operations allows technicians outside the aircraft to monitor the crews' location in the event that something goes wrong. Flight following can be as simple as reporting location, direction and altitude. But it can also be as detailed as reporting actual weather conditions, fuel status or requesting assistance in an emergency.

Most air medical operators are required by regulators to report their position every 15 minutes in flight. The reporting structure is recommended for other public safety aviation operations, as well. In the event that a 15-minute report is not received, the flight following service will attempt to communicate with the aircraft to confirm its status. If there is no response to the communica-

tion, the follower can initiate a search using the last point of communication and flight route. Many search and rescue operations, as well as some law enforcement units, use a similar procedure to verify the location and safe status of each flight.

Communication personnel and flight dispatchers must be trained in flight following procedures, navigation, map reading, airborne weather conditions and basic aviation terminology. The training is crucial for delivering needed assistance to disabled aircraft or injured crewmembers in a timely manner.

It is also important for public safety units to train in post-accident procedures. Safety protocol within any aviation organization should have a written post-accident incident plan (PAIP). The plan should include detailed instructions for notifications and procedures in the event of:

- Unscheduled or precautionary landings (due to mechanical deficiency or inclement weather, among other situations).

- Missing or overdue aircraft that have not communicated with dispatch within the specified time (often 15 minutes after estimated time of arrival).
- Missed in-air communications between aircraft and dispatch after a specified time for expected reporting (also often 15 minutes).

Other situations can initiate a PAIP, as well. Whatever the incident, the procedures should cover the persons to be notified, the priority of notifications and the policies for disseminating information. Procedures can also be in place for:

- Emergency protocol for serious emergencies or accidents.
- Ambulance notification after an accident (if needed).

Training for communicators should include a review of the plan, including discussions on basic scenarios in which the plan might be used. An annual PAIP



drill, which should include all parties involved, is recommended.

Multiple public safety aviation accidents have occurred after which significant delays in reporting missing aircraft have led to difficulty in finding the aircraft and crewmembers involved. Training can include discussion of the case studies or dry-run drills to reinforce the importance of the PAIP and accurate, timely communication.

Communication personnel and flight dispatchers can also be included in preflight and post-flight safety briefings. The briefings give pilots and crews the opportunity to discuss full safety and emergency protocols.

If flight following is not available from a local dispatch or communication center, pilots can request VFR flight following from air traffic control (ATC). ATC will then monitor the flight in real time and may provide weather and airspace advisories and assist with diversions and traffic avoidance. The controller will want to know the crews' present position, aircraft type/tail

number and altitude, and the flight's destination or area of operation, if flying a grid or conducting a search. The pilot retains the responsibility to see and avoid other aircraft and obstacles, but ATC communication can provide an extra level of safety.

Flight following can be requested anywhere radar coverage is available, which is an extensive network, even at relatively low altitudes. VFR flight following and ATC communication procedures can be found in the Federal Aviation Administration's *Airman's Information Manual*. The information, along with current regulations and procedures necessary for a unit's specific area of operations, should be reviewed in annual training.

Flight following using dispatch or ATC can also aid in the safe sharing of airspace among manned and unmanned operations. Frequently, departments using drones are housed separately from manned aviation units. Communications alerting each unit to the other division's operational area reduces the risk of mid-air or near-miss encounters.

When flight following procedures are in place for manned aircraft, uncrewed aircraft operators must also alert the communication provider, such as dispatch or ATC (in areas covered by a controller).

Training for flight following and communication procedures increases situational awareness for both pilots and non-flying crewmembers. The importance of clear, concise communication must be stressed throughout training procedures. Communication is a perishable skill that aviators lose over time, particularly when they become dependent on technology or are forced to multi-task. Mission focus often draws crews' attention away from the need to let others know where and how they are operating their aircraft.

Communication is critical to safe operations in flight—for both manned and unmanned operations. Flight following and situational awareness must remain a priority to maintain safety, and repeated training for effective communication is vital.