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Commitment to Safety

LifeFlight of Maine is committed to creating the safest patient care and operating environment. Each day people from across Maine entrust us with their lives and the lives of their loved ones. Our simple, yet profound, philosophy is that we must always be worthy of that trust.

Over the last 15 years, LifeFlight has worked and continues to work diligently to create a culture of safety.

LifeFlight working with ERA Helicopters, Meridian Mobile Health (Bangor), and United Ambulance (Lewiston) have safely transported more than 17,000 patients since 1998 precisely because we put safety first. LifeFlight is proud to have been recognized with the national Charlson Air Medical Safety Award in 2003 and a national Excellence in Community Service Award for its aviation safety infrastructure project in 2007. In addition, LifeFlight was named the top air medical program in the US and Canada in 2008, an honor that is earned through demonstrating the highest levels of safety, quality, business ethics and innovation. LifeFlight's leadership has been called on to provide subject matter expertise by the National Transportation Safety Board (NTSB), the State of Maryland, and multiple aviation operators and medical transport providers throughout North America and Europe.

But we know that our commitment to safety must be renewed daily.

We believe it is important for our partners and the public to understand the essential elements in LifeFlight's approach to safety. Before a call even comes in, LifeFlight has taken steps to ensure the highest level of safety.

All calls that come through LifeFlight's communication center must originate from a physician at a hospital or an EMS professional at the scene of an accident. Both physicians and EMTs are guided by strict medical criteria for air transports, and frequently consult with LifeFlight's medical directors or emergency room physicians at one of the state's three trauma centers. LifeFlight uses very conservative criteria to determine the medical necessity of transports using both helicopters and ground vehicles with LifeFlight teams. Ground critical care is used when there is no time urgency or when the weather prevents safe flight operations.

When a request for transport does come in, the pilot's first consideration must be safety. Our pilots are not given any details from the call, whether the patient is a 3-year-old car accident victim or a 57-year-old heart transplant candidate, so that they can make an objective decision about the safety of the flight.

As LifeFlight is a hospital-based, non-profit service, the pilots feel no pressure to make a flight in order to generate revenue. Once the pilot accepts the flight request, the dispatchers are in constant contact with the aircraft, as well as with communication centers from neighboring air medicine services and other EMS agencies.

LifeFlight was built on the premise of achieving the highest performance possible for operating and clinical safety. We believe that by developing a carefully designed and operated system, we can reduce the risks of emergency operations to as low as possible. Some of the essential elements include:

- LifeFlight has incorporated all of the latest safety recommendations from the National Transportation Safety Board and meets and/or exceeds all current Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) Part 135 Aviation Regulations.
- LifeFlight aircraft are equipped with the latest generation aircraft incorporating full instrument flights, autopilots, state of the art navigation, terrain and aviation collision avoidance systems, satellite tracking and communications, weather radar, and instrumentation improving safety and services to patients.

- LifeFlight created a public-private partnership with the Maine Department of Public Safety/ Maine EMS, the Maine Department of Transportation, the FAA, and the US Department of Agriculture’s Rural Development program to create a first in the nation complete low level instrument flight system (IFR) supported by 18 automated aviation weather observation systems, 39 instrument approach and departure procedures at hospitals, airports, and our island communities, over the road fuel trucks, and an entire system of remote landing zones and community helipads. One of the major risks identified by the National Transportation Safety Board is using visual flight rules (VFR) in low light and marginal weather conditions. Most air medical operations in the USA are VFR only programs. LifeFlight fully incorporates IFR operations to optimize safety performance.
- Recently DHART, the Dartmouth-Hitchcock Air Response Team, and Boston MedFlight have developed low level instrument procedures and routes. LifeFlight, DHART, and MedFlight are working on a cooperative project for an entire IFR system for northern New England.
- Over 42% of LifeFlight’s occur in at night. Recognizing the additional risks posed by night operations, LifeFlight has full night vision technology to its aircraft and operations.
- In recognition of the risks for scene operations, LifeFlight has created a database of more than 600 known landing sites across Maine including nearly 100 remote landing sites which are maintained by local landowners, snow mobile /ATV clubs, and local Fire/Rescue services. The entire database is linked to all of the 911 Regional Public Safety Communications system allowing all 911 operators mapping access to the closest known LZ to a reported emergency.
- LifeFlight created the Remote Access Project as a cooperative involving Maine Emergency Management, Regional 911 Systems, the Maine State Police, Maine Warden Service, Maine Department of Conservation, the Maine Fire Chiefs Association, the US Customs and Border Patrol, major woodland landowners, wind power companies, conservation groups, and multiple recreational associations such as the Maine Snow Mobile Association to assure rapid access into the emergency care system.
- Recognizing the distinct core competencies of aviation and medicine, LifeFlight works with ERA Helicopters, one of the premier aviation operations in the country. ERA has consistently achieved an exemplary safety record in aviation.
- In addition to meeting all applicable licensing standards, LifeFlight maintains full voluntary national, “gold standard” accreditation awarded by the Commission of Accreditation for Medical Transport Systems (CAMTS).
- LifeFlight was a founding member of the Aviation Safety Network--North America (ASN). First originating in Australia, the ASN is a unique voluntary association with some of the most highly regarded medical organizations in the USA and Canada. We benchmark our performance to these organizations in an effort to meet a set of 84 international best practice aviation standards.
- LifeFlight is a member of the FAA and industry-led International Helicopter Safety Team project (IHST) and LifeFlight personnel lead one of the IHST work groups seeking to improve aviation safety infrastructure.
- LifeFlight incorporates a fully integrated Safety and Quality Management System (SQMS). Safety Management Systems—a completely integrated approach to safety from the top down and bottom up are standard for the major airlines and NASA.
- LifeFlight and ERA use regular external assessment of quality with regular audits of both the aviation and clinical operations.
- Careful and continuous medical oversight. LifeFlight has an ongoing Quality Assurance and Performance

Improvement program that continuously identifies, audits, and develops specific management risk strategies for any activity with potential for high risk consequence. Twenty seven emergency and specialist physicians from hospitals in Maine volunteer their time to oversee LifeFlight clinical care.

- LifeFlight works with public safety, 911, EMS, and hospital personnel across the state to assure the safety of operations. Annually, LifeFlight and MedComm personnel provide over 30 continuing education safety programs at no cost annually to our partners in care.
- All LifeFlight personnel regularly participate in Crew Resource Management (CRM) programs. High performance, team-based operations have been identified as core clinical and aviation safety elements in building a culture of safety.
- LifeFlight is a member of the North East Air Alliance, (NEAA) a collaboration of Boston MedFlight, DHART Dartmouth Hitchcock Medical Center in New Hampshire, the University of Massachusetts, and the LifeSTAR program at the Hartford Hospitals in Connecticut. Unlike other areas in the country with many competing programs, New England has a cooperative approach with multiple best practices followed by all programs assuring that there is simultaneous high regard for medical necessity and conservative aviation operations.
- In order to improve communications, all LifeFlight Communication Specialists, or certified ACS (air-medical communication specialists) by the National Association of Air Medical Communication Specialists. LifeFlight has hosted multiple national certification programs with colleagues from NEAA and across the country. All medical crew are also required to attain specialty certifications in flight and critical care transport.
- All of the NEAA programs actively share communications and have incorporated technology and best practices to have all aircraft in New England monitored by all of communication centers at all times. LifeFlight, working with other NEAA program communication centers, has a long standing control plan for helipads in Boston, as well as at Maine Medical Center, Central Maine Medical Center, Eastern Maine Medical Center, and Dartmouth-Hitchcock Medical Center. Positive communication control of access in and out of helipads is essential in preventing an accident like the one that just occurred in Flagstaff.
- LifeFlight pilots and communications specialists (dispatchers) work with colleagues at other NEAA programs on a daily and immediate basis to share weather and safety information.

We recognize that safety is at the heart of practice, each day and each patient. It is constantly earned.

Human error is the most pervasive and difficult challenge we face in medicine, as there is no one single strategy we can employ—technically, educationally, or regulatory—that can overcome error. Air and critical transport medicine is among the most complex and high consequence of medical environments. Even a momentary loss of focus may result in disastrous consequences. Emergency operations with limited planning time, the application of critical care medicine, and the ever changing New England weather aviation environment, each present an increased opportunity for human error. Managing risk and reducing error in these operating environments is among the most challenging practice arena of medicine. These are the challenges LifeFlight faces every day.

It is our consistent goal to operate at the highest level of public trust. LifeFlight works nationally and internationally to make sure we are operating at the leading edge of safety and quality. The people of Maine, and our partners in emergency healthcare, deserve a system that is under constant measurement to assure the safety of operations.

Thomas Judge, CCTP
Executive Director
June 2014

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