

To: All Montana and Surrounding Hospitals

From: Montana Based Air Medical Transport Programs

Subject: Activation of Air Medical Transport Programs (AMT) during inclement weather

Montana is a vast and frontier landscape that is home to some of the most majestic and beautiful landscapes available across America. Our environment is generally conducive to safe and efficient Air Medical Operations. We write today to request your assistance in enhancing that safety.

Environmental weather patterns in our operational area can vary based on location and timing. Many of these storm systems are fast moving which allows for weather improvement in a short period of time. This allows the AMT's operating within this state to respond to a majority of calls on the first request with little other coordination needed.

“Helicopter Shopping” is a term that is used nationally to describe facilities or services who call multiple air medical programs to find one that will transfer their patient without the regard for weather or safety items that may impact that transfer. The results of this practice have had disastrous consequences that we are unwilling to accept in Montana. This letter is being written on behalf of the Montana Air Medical Alliance (MAMA) and is one way we are going to work to reduce that risk.

Background Capabilities

Most civilian programs operating aircraft in Montana rely on Visual Flight Rules (VFR) weather for most helicopter operations except in very specific situations. Airplanes can use either Instrument or Visual Flight Rules (IFR) weather for all fixed wing operations. While each program and their aircraft may have subtle differences in their program or aircraft specific rules, overall, the same rules apply for programs across the state. Another factor that may affect acceptance of a transfer is the route. There are many days air medical transport may be available to go to one receiving location but not another.

As a rule, Air Medical Programs report turned down transfer requests to Weather Turn Down, a national database of weather denials. This allows us to track the transfers that have been turned down, where they were to and from, and a reason why they were declined. It is not uncommon to turn down a helicopter flight, but then have the same program or another program take the transfer by fixed wing. Fixed Wing aircraft can land most places on most days, but that also depends on the location, runway conditions and runway capabilities. Conversely, there are places that based on runway conditions, a helicopter may be able to make it in, but fixed wing operations are not capable of landing on the runway. This is not common but can occur.

Our Request

Our request to you is to share certain information with our coordination centers. If another flight program has turned down a transfer request due to weather, we request that this information be shared at the time of the call. This information is invaluable to our pilots and crews in their flight planning. This will also become a federal requirement in the near future.

A good rule of thumb is that if it isn't the weather surrounding the patient that is the issue, another program may be able to help. However, if it is the weather surrounding your patient, depending on aircraft capability, the patient may have to remain at the referral center until the weather lifts or other options are activated such as ground transport. A caution should be made with ground transport activation. With few exceptions, the weather patterns affecting aircraft generally affect the ground environment as well. The risks and benefits of moving a patient in this manner must be carefully weighed. The majority of weather turn downs in Montana have to do with ground level visibility. Sheltering in place may be the safest option for all involved at times.

Respectfully submitted on behalf of all Montana and Utah's Air Medical Programs.

