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Highlights

Highlights of [GAO-09-627T](#), a testimony before the Subcommittee on Aviation, Committee on Transportation and Infrastructure, House of Representatives

Why GAO Did This Study

Air ambulance transport is widely regarded as improving the chances of survival for trauma victims and other critical patients. However, recent increases in the number of air ambulance accidents have led to greater industry scrutiny by government agencies, the public, the media, and the industry itself. The National Transportation Safety Board (NTSB) and others have called on the Federal Aviation Administration (FAA), which provides safety oversight, to issue more stringent safety requirements for the industry.

This testimony discusses (1) recent trends in the air ambulance industry with regard to its size, composition, and safety record; (2) recent industry and government efforts to improve air ambulance safety; and (3) potential strategies for improving air ambulance safety. This testimony is based primarily on GAO's February 2007 study on air ambulance safety ([GAO-07-353](#)). To update and supplement this 2007 report, GAO analyzed the latest safety information from NTSB and FAA, reviewed published literature on the state of the air ambulance industry, and interviewed FAA officials and industry representatives.

GAO provided a copy of the draft testimony statement to FAA. FAA provided technical comments, which GAO incorporated as appropriate.

To view the full product, including the scope and methodology, click on [GAO-09-627T](#). For more information, contact Gerald L. Dillingham at (202) 512-2834 or dillingham@gao.gov.

AVIATION SAFETY

Potential Strategies to Address Air Ambulance Safety Concerns

What GAO Found

The air ambulance industry has increased in size, and concerns about its safety have grown in recent years. Available data suggest that the industry grew, most notably in the number of stand alone (independent or community-based) as opposed to hospital-based operators, and competition increased among operators, from 2003 through 2008. During this period, the number of air ambulance accidents remained at historical levels, fluctuating between 11 and 15 accidents per year, and in 2008, the number of fatal accidents peaked at 9. This accident record is cause for concern. However, a lack of reliable data on flight hours precludes calculation of the industry accident rate—a critical piece of information in determining whether the increased number of accidents reflects industry growth or a declining safety record.

The air ambulance industry and FAA have acted to address accident trends and causes. For example, FAA enhanced its oversight to reflect the varying sizes of operators, provided technical resources to the industry, launched an accident mitigation program, and revised the minimum standards for weather and safe cruising altitudes that apply to air ambulance operations.

Despite the actions to improve air ambulance safety, 2008 was the deadliest year on record for the industry. Through its work on aviation safety, including air ambulance safety; review of the published literature; and interviews with government and industry officials, GAO has identified several potential strategies for improving air ambulance safety, including the following:

- Obtain complete and accurate data on air ambulance operations.
- Increase the use of safety technologies.
- Sustain recent efforts to improve air ambulance safety.
- Fully address NTSB's recommendations.
- Adopt safety management systems within the air ambulance industry.
- Clarify the role of states in overseeing air medical services.
- Determine the appropriate use of air ambulance services.

Air Ambulance Helicopters



Sources: FEMA and Washington State Department of Health.