



Charleston County Sheriff's Office Policy and Procedures Manual

Sheriff Carl Ritchie

16-14

SMALL UNMANNED AIRCRAFT SYSTEMS

- ☐ NEW
- ☒ REVISED
- ☒ REVIEWED

ACA Standards Reference:
CALEA Standards Reference: 33.6.1
NCCHC Standards Reference:
SCLEA Standards Reference:
SC Minimum Standards:

This policy dated 1/29/2025 replaces prior policies cited above and supersedes all previously issued directives.

I. Purpose:

To establish a policy for the deployment and use of small Unmanned Aircraft Systems (sUAS) to include instructions on when and how this technology and the information it provides may be used for law enforcement and public safety purposes in accordance with local, State and Federal law.

II. Policy:

The Charleston County Sheriff's Office may use small Unmanned Aircraft Systems (sUAS) to enhance the agency's mission to protect lives and property when other means and resources might not be available or may be less effective. Any use of sUAS will be in strict accordance with constitutional rights, privacy rights, and the Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) regulations.

III. Definitions:

- A. For purposes of this procedure, the word "deputy" applies to all agency employees with a certification classification of Class I, Class II, or Class III, as defined by the South Carolina Criminal Justice Academy.

The following terms are used interchangeably; however, they carry guidance to specific employees based on usage of the term:

1. Deputy, deputy sheriff, detention deputy, sworn employee, uniformed sworn employee, sworn administrative employee, and
 2. civilian, non-sworn employee.
- B. *Employee*: When used without further clarification, the term employee is inclusive of all agency members (sworn and non-sworn).
- C. *Model Aircraft*: A remote controlled aircraft used by hobbyists that is built, produced, manufactured, and operated for the purposes of sport, recreation, and/or competition.
- D. *Small Unmanned Aircraft System (sUAS)*: A system that includes the necessary equipment, network, and personnel to control an unmanned aircraft that weighs less than fifty-five (55) pounds and is consistent with Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) regulations governing model aircraft.
- E. *sUAS Flight Crewmember*: A pilot, visual observer, payload operator or other person assigned duties for the sUAS for the purpose of a flight or training

exercise.

F. *sUAS Pilot*: A person exercising control over the sUAS during a flight.

G. *Pilot in Command (PIC)*: A person who holds a current Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) Remote Pilot Certification as defined by 14 CFR part 107. The PIC is responsible for the operation of the sUAS, even when not physically operating the sUAS. All flight decisions made by the PIC are final.

IV. Procedure:

A. sUAS Unit Organization

1. The sUAS Unit is a collateral duty within the Bomb Squad.
2. The sUAS Unit is composed of sworn personnel under the command of the Bomb Squad Lieutenant and Sergeant.
3. In the absence of the Bomb Squad Lieutenant and Sergeant, the designated PIC will carry out these duties and responsibilities.
4. Administratively, the sUAS Unit Lieutenant reports to the Special Operations Bureau METRO Division Captain.

B. Administration

1. All deployments of the sUAS will be specifically authorized by the Sheriff or designee.
2. The sUAS may be used to provide an aerial visual perspective in training exercises, emergency situations and exigent circumstances.
3. The sUAS may also be used in the following situations:
 - a. *Situational Awareness*: To assist decision makers (e.g., Incident Command personnel, first responders, city / county / state / federal officials, etc.) in understanding the nature, scale, and scope of an incident and for the planning and coordinating of an effective response.
 - b. *Search and Rescue*: To assist in missing person investigations, AMBER Alerts, Silver Alerts, Endangered Persons and other search and rescue missions.
 - c. *Tactical Deployment*: To support the tactical deployment of

officers and equipment in emergency situations (e.g., hostage/barricaded subjects, large-scale tactical operations, temporary perimeter security situations, Bomb Squad operations, etc.).

- d. *Visual Perspective:* To provide an aerial visual perspective to assist officers in providing direction for crowd control, traffic incident management, special circumstances, and temporary perimeter security.
- e. *Scene Documentation:* To document a crime scene, accident scene, or other major incident scene (e.g., disaster management, incident response, large-scale forensic scene investigation, etc.).
- f. *Training:* To document various training scenarios in order to provide enhanced law enforcement training and knowledge.

C. Use of sUAS:

- 1. This agency will obtain all applicable authorizations, permits, and certificates required by the Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) prior to deploying or operating the sUAS. All authorizations, permits, and certificates will be maintained and remain current.
- 2. The sUAS will be under the direction of a FAA certified PIC and will be operated only by personnel (pilots and crew members) who have been trained and/or certified in the operation of the system.
- 3. The sUAS-certified Pilot/PIC will complete a documented inspection and testing of all sUAS equipment prior to each deployment to verify proper functioning and airworthiness of the device.
- 4. All sUAS equipment is the responsibility of the sUAS Unit and will be used with reasonable care to ensure proper functioning. Equipment malfunctions will be brought to the attention of the sUAS Unit Supervisor as soon as possible so that an appropriate repair can be made, or a replacement unit can be procured.
- 5. The sUAS equipment and all data, images, video, and metadata captured, recorded, or otherwise produced by the equipment is the sole property of the Charleston County Sheriff's Office.
- 6. All flights will be documented in the Pilot/PIC Logbook designed for

that purpose, and all flight times will be accurately recorded. In addition, each deployment will be recorded on the sUAS log in EIS and will include:

- a. Reason for the flight;
 - b. date and time;
 - c. location;
 - d. name of requesting supervisor;
 - e. responding flight crew members; and
 - f. summary of activities covered, actions taken, and outcomes from deployment.
7. When there is specific and articulable grounds to believe that the sUAS will collect evidence of criminal wrongdoing and/or if the sUAS will be used in a manner that may intrude upon reasonable expectations of privacy, this agency will obtain a search warrant prior to conducting the flight.

D. Restrictions on using the sUAS:

1. The sUAS will be deployed and used only to support official law enforcement, public safety missions, and other official agency use approved by the Sheriff, sUAS Supervisor, or their designee.
2. Agency sUAS equipment is intended for official use only and will not be used for unofficial, personal, or frivolous activities.
3. The sUAS will not be operated in an unsafe manner or in violation of any FAA rules.
4. The sUAS will not be equipped with weapons of any kind.

E. Video Recording Retention and Management:

1. All video recordings will comply with existing policy on electronic media storage and retention, where applicable.
2. All video recordings will be downloaded to a secure server at the completion of each mission. The sUAS-certified operators will record

information for each file that will include the date, time, location, and case number (if any) or other mission identifiers to include the sUAS personnel involved in the mission.

3. Video recordings of an evidentiary value will be handled in accordance with existing policy, where applicable. (RE: [Policy 9-23 Mobile & Body Worn Video/ Audio Recording Equipment](#) and [Policy 15-01 Property and Evidence Control](#)).
4. All recorded media is considered confidential and property of the Charleston County Sheriff's Office; and as such, will not be copied, released, shared, or disseminated, in any form outside the parameters of this policy or for unofficial purposes without prior written authorization and approval from the Sheriff, sUAS Supervisor, or their designee.
5. Deputies will not edit, alter, or erase any recorded media prior to downloading to the secure server. Approved copies of recorded media may be edited accordingly for the specific intended purposes.
6. All access to sUAS video recordings will be specifically authorized by the Sheriff, sUAS Supervisor, or their designee, and all access will be audited at least quarterly by the sUAS supervisor to ensure that only authorized users are accessing the data for legitimate and authorized purposes.
7. Files will be securely stored in accordance with Agency policy and South Carolina Records Retention laws. They will not be retained any longer than necessary other than for purposes of training or for use in an investigation or prosecution.

F. sUAS Supervision and Reporting:

1. The sUAS Unit Supervisor or designee will manage all deployments and uses of the sUAS to ensure that authorized operators utilize it in accordance with approved policies and procedures.
2. The sUAS Supervisor or designee will audit flight documentation at least quarterly. The results of the audit will be documented in an annual report.
3. The sUAS Unit Supervisor or designee, will complete monthly deployment statistics as well as an annual report documenting the deployment and use of the sUAS. These reports will be forwarded to

the Special Operations Bureau METRO Division Captain.

G. Training

1. Agency personnel who are assigned to the sUAS Unit will complete training upon assignment to the team to ensure knowledge of proper use and operation.
2. The PIC must obtain a 14CFR part 107 Certification prior to taking command of the sUAS. Certification will be maintained and renewed every two years as mandated by FAA Regulations.
(Ref: CALEA 33.6.1 item a)
3. sUAS Unit training will be conducted at least monthly to ensure continued effective use and operation of all sUAS equipment. All equipment will be inspected, and the results documented to include proper calibration and performance at each monthly training to ensure operational readiness.
(Ref: CALEA 33.6.1 item b)
4. All agency personnel assigned to the sUAS unit will be trained in the local, state, and federal laws and regulations, as well as policies and procedures governing the deployment and use of the sUAS.
(Ref: CALEA 33.6.1 item c)