



# Charleston County Sheriff's Office Policy and Procedures Manual

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Sheriff Carl Ritchie

## 16-07 Air Support Unit

- NEW
- REVISED
- REVIEWED

ACA Standards Reference:  
CALEA Standards Reference: 33.6.1, 41.1.3, 46.2.5  
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 procedures for the Charleston County Sheriff's Office Air Support Unit.

II. Policy:

The Charleston County Sheriff's Office will provide air support to local, state, and federal law enforcement agencies, in compliance with Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) regulations and procedures.

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, Class III, or Reserve Deputy, 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, deputies, 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).

IV. Procedure:

A. Administration:

1. The Air Support Unit is under the command of the Bureau of Special Operations.
2. The Air Support Unit is available for call-out 24 hours a day, seven days a week, to respond as needed with approval of a supervisor.
3. When air support is needed for immediate response, the Patrol Supervisor or Unit Supervisor will request call-out through the Charleston County Consolidated 9-1-1 Center (911 Center).
4. The Air Support Unit Chief Pilot or designee will approve or disapprove use of the aircraft.

5. Requests for the aircraft for non-exigent duties should be made as far in advance as possible and in memorandum form via the chain-of-command to the Air Support Unit Chief Pilot.

(Ref: CALEA 41.1.3 item a)

**B. Duties and Responsibilities:**

1. Agency aircraft will be used by the Sheriff's Office at the Sheriff's and/or Chief Pilot's discretion.
2. The pilot-in-command (PIC) is directly responsible for and is the final authority as to the operation of any agency aircraft. In an emergency, pilots may deviate from any policy or Federal Aviation Regulation (FAR) to the extent necessary to meet the emergency.
3. The PIC has the ultimate responsibility for the safety of the crew and passengers and may terminate or modify operational plans as needed after giving due consideration to mission objectives.
4. Agency aircraft will be operated at all times by a licensed pilot of the Charleston County Sheriff's Office Air Support Unit with the approval of the Air Support Unit Chief Pilot and/or the Sheriff.  
(Ref: CALEA 41.1.3 item c)
5. Only designated law enforcement personnel and Charleston County officials may be transported aboard the aircraft utilized and operated by a Sheriff's Office pilot in the performance of duty, unless authorized by the Sheriff and/or Air Support Unit Chief Pilot.
6. All flight missions will remain within the boundaries of Charleston County, except when permission is obtained from the Air Support Unit Chief Pilot for extenuating circumstances (i.e., training, in pursuit of a felon, to maintain separation from other aircraft, maintenance, or to assist other law enforcement agencies).  
(Ref: CALEA 41.1.3 item a)
7. Air Support Unit personnel will obey all FAA regulations when operating Charleston County aircraft. FAA regulations will overrule any agency directive that is contradictory to such regulations.  
(Ref: CALEA 41.1.3 item a)
8. Air Support Unit personnel are responsible for monitoring radio traffic and responding to calls for service as directed for assistance.

9. Air Support Unit personnel will document all missions in flight logs and submit documentation in a monthly report to the Air Support Unit Chief Pilot.
10. Ground handling of any agency aircraft will be done by or under the direct supervision of Air Support Unit personnel.
11. Air Support Unit aircraft may be utilized for the following:
  - a. to aid Patrol, Criminal Investigation Division (CID), etc., in the apprehension and surveillance of criminal suspects as necessary;
  - b. to assist in search operations or locating missing persons where a life is in danger; (Ref: CALEA 46.2.5)
  - c. to provide counter narcotics measures such as marijuana eradication;
  - d. to provide aerial support for agency specialized units such as Canine, SWAT, Metro Major Case Unit, etc.;
  - e. to provide aerial support to patrol units engaged in a vehicle pursuit;
  - f. to provide aerial response to disasters;
  - g. to accomplish aerial photography;
  - h. to assist other law enforcement agencies or governmental agencies upon request;
  - i. to reach crime scenes where patrol units are unable to reach the scene by other means;
  - j. in covert surveillance to provide aerial support for agency specialized units;
  - k. in overt surveillance to include, but not limited to, major gatherings, VIP security, major disasters such as fires, floods, tornadoes, civil disorders, or demonstrations, etc. where road travel is impossible;

- l. in exigent circumstances, to transport sworn personnel injured in the line of duty, as well as other persons critically injured to nearby medical facilities;
- m. as a last resort, for delivering valuable documents that are vital in felony related cases; and
- n. to conduct harbor security patrols and other law enforcement missions related to homeland security.

(Ref: CALEA 41.1.3 item a)

**C. Selection for Pilots:**

1. Pilots must meet the minimum employment criteria for deputy sheriffs and be chosen for employment by the agency hiring board.
2. Pilots must possess a commercial instrument helicopter rating certification. Because of the similarities of duty, military flight school training and flight experience is preferred.
3. Pilots must pass a flight physical and maintain a Class II medical certificate.

(Ref: CALEA 41.1.3 item b)

**D. Training:**

Pilots who are not certified law enforcement officers must complete the required basic training course at the South Carolina Criminal Justice Academy. All pilots are required to complete agency training requirements with a field training officer, as well as any recertification/in-service training as assigned. Patrol experience is required for all pilots prior to assuming full-time flight assignment. (Ref: CALEA 33.6.1 items a & b, and 41.1.3 item b)

**E. Medical Fitness:**

1. Air Support Unit personnel are prohibited from making flights when emotionally, mentally, or physically unfit.
2. Air Support Unit personnel are prohibited from using any type of medication unless prior approval has been granted by the Air Support Unit Chief Pilot and a licensed physician.

- F. Tactical Flight Officers (TFO):
1. TFO must be a certified law enforcement officer from a municipal, county, state, or federal agency located within the lowcountry.
  2. TFO must have at least 18 months law enforcement experience.
  3. TFO must complete a two day school in air operations with an additional commitment of 2 eight-hour shifts per month, as well as any additional training as deemed necessary. Duty as a TFO is considered a collateral duty assignment. (Ref: CALEA 41.1.3 item b)
  4. TFO Responsibilities:
    - a. to observe activity on the ground, keep the pilot informed, and coordinate operations with field officers;
    - b. to monitor and operate the police radio, coordinating with the 911 Center and field units;
    - c. to operate special aircraft equipment which the TFO has received training on such as the search light, FLIR, Alastar, and aircraft communications/navigation equipment;  
(Ref: CALEA 41.1.3 item d)
    - d. to assist the pilot with pre-flight and post-flight inspections of the aircraft; and
    - e. to perform any other duties as required by the PIC or the Air Support Unit Chief Pilot.
- G. Safety:
1. All persons are to remain at least 25 feet away from any running aircraft unless otherwise authorized by the pilot or TFO.
  2. All vehicles, including those picking up or discharging passengers/cargo are to remain at least 50 feet away from running aircraft unless otherwise authorized by the pilot or TFO.
  3. Smoking is prohibited during flight operations and within 50 feet of agency aircraft.

4. Persons will keep away from the rotor areas of agency aircraft at all times.
5. Persons will utilize the seatbelts and will keep them fastened at all times after boarding, unless directed otherwise by the PIC.
6. All passengers flying in agency aircraft will be given a safety briefing prior to any flight. A briefing should include, but is not limited to the following:
  - a. safe entry or exit from aircraft;
  - b. seat belts/harnesses;
  - c. passenger movement inside aircraft;
  - d. miscellaneous equipment;
  - e. location of fire equipment and first aid kit; and
  - f. emergency procedures.
7. Additional Helicopter Safety Requirements:
  - a. Persons/vehicles will always approach and depart the helicopter within view of the pilot and will never approach or leave to the rear of the helicopter.
  - b. Persons will crouch low before moving under the main rotor. The main rotor blade will be within five feet of ground level or lower, under certain conditions. If on a hill, persons will always approach on the downhill side of the helicopter and, if necessary, to get to the opposite side, will walk to the front of the helicopter.
  - c. Persons will carry all equipment or articles horizontally or at waist level, never upright or over the shoulder.
  - d. Persons should protect their eyes by shielding them when approaching the helicopter. If suddenly blinded by dust or other blowing objects, persons should stop and await help. They should never grope or feel their way toward or away from the helicopter.

- e. Personnel must utilize the seatbelts and keep them fastened at all times after boarding the helicopter. Any person occupying a front seat will also use the shoulder harness. When exiting the helicopter and prior to closing the door, persons will secure their seatbelt and shoulder harness at their unoccupied seat to ensure that the restraining devices remain inside the aircraft.
8. In-Flight Safety:
- a. The PIC will determine if weather conditions and the aircraft's condition are conducive to a safe flight.
  - b. Air Support Unit personnel will normally wear issued flight gear and agency issued firearms.
  - c. Air Support Unit personnel will perform only the necessary flight maneuvers needed to successfully complete a mission.
- H. Equipment/Storage/Maintenance:
1. The Air Support Unit consists of rotary wing aircraft equipped with 800 MHz radio systems.
  2. Agency aircraft will be stored and maintained at a location contracted by Charleston County.
  3. Maintenance will be performed by a licensed mechanic as designated by contractual agreement, except when circumstances dictate it would be in the best interest of the County to have the work performed elsewhere. All aircraft will be maintained and inspected on a regular basis in accordance with FAA standards.
  4. The Air Support Unit Chief Pilot is responsible for the condition and maintenance of all Charleston County aircraft, ensuring operational readiness.  
(Ref: CALEA 41.1.3 item c)
- I. Hold Harmless Agreement:
- Any person that is not a member of the Sheriff's Office, a law enforcement officer, or a sworn member of a task force affiliated with the Sheriff's Office will sign a *Hold Harmless Agreement (CCSO form-244)* prior to being conveyed on an aircraft that is under the control of the Charleston County Sheriff's Office.

J. Aircraft Security:

1. Only personnel assigned to the Air Support Unit are permitted in any Air Support Unit facility unless accompanied by Air Support Unit personnel or prior arrangements have been made with the Air Support Unit Chief Pilot or pilot.
2. Responsibility for the security of the aircraft will rest with the last member of the Air Support Unit who leaves the facility.

K. Refueling:

1. Refueling will be performed by contracted fuel personnel or unit pilot.
2. "Hot" refueling of the helicopter will be done in emergency situations only. Closed port refueling with a CCR nozzle is the only authorized form of "hot" refueling allowed, and only with the approval of the PIC. When "hot" refueling, the following procedures will be strictly adhered to:
  - a. the PIC will remain at the flight controls during the refueling and the engine reduced to flight idle;
  - b. a designated and trained refueler will conduct the actual refueling and grounding of the helicopter;
  - c. a second designated and trained refueler will stand by with a fire extinguisher and act as a fire guard during the refueling operation;
  - d. persons not directly involved in the refueling operation, including passengers, will remain clear of the area; and
  - e. in the event of a fire or other emergency during the refueling, the pilot will perform an emergency shut down and exit the aircraft.

L. Pursuit Operations:

1. When an Air Support Unit aircraft responds to assist with a pursuit, the following will apply:
  - a. the TFO will immediately begin coordinating with ground units;

- b. once the Air Support Unit is in the pursuit, the TFO will keep ground units informed on direction of travel, traffic, and roadway conditions ahead of the pursuit and any other tactical information the TFO may be able to obtain while overhead; and
- c. the PIC may terminate the Air Support Unit's involvement in a pursuit at any time, if safety considerations or flight risks become evident.

**M. Search Operations:**

- 1. When responding to a search operation, the TFO will gather as much information as possible prior to arrival on the scene. If possible, this initial information should be gathered over the telephone prior to departure.
- 2. Upon arrival, the TFO will request updated information from the scene supervisor.
- 3. The TFO will coordinate with the scene supervisor and other ground units in setting up and maintaining a perimeter.

(Ref: CALEA 46.2.5)

**N. Specialized Unit Support:**

- 1. The use of the Air Support Unit in support of other Sheriff's Office specialized units is encouraged. However, training and familiarization must take place in order to perform the mission safely and efficiently. Training with these units should include:
  - a. approaching and exiting the aircraft;
  - b. entry/exit;
  - c. making weapons safe for flight operations;
  - d. control of canines during flight operations;
  - e. radio/intercom procedures; and
  - f. emergency procedures.

(Ref: CALEA 33.6.1 items a & c)

O. Static Display

1. The PIC is responsible for ensuring that landing sites, crowd control, and times of landing and departure are arranged to minimize danger to aircrew, aircraft, or persons or property on the surface. When possible, the PIC should visit the landing site prior to arrival and survey the area for obstacles and/or other hazards.
2. During static displays, it will be the responsibility of the aircrew to ensure the security of the aircraft.

P. Off-Airport Landings:

1. When the need exists to land the helicopter off airport, the PIC has the ultimate responsibility for the safety of the aircraft and any resultant action of an intentional landing. When a decision to land is made, the following procedures will be followed:
  - a. for planned operations, secure permission from the scene supervisor or property owner;
  - b. if possible, use a uniformed deputy sheriff and marked patrol vehicle to secure the scene;
  - c. a high reconnaissance will be required prior to landing; and
  - d. a low reconnaissance will be performed while on final approach.
2. During tactical or rescue operations, landings may be made as necessary. The primary concern during these landings will be the safety of the aircrew, aircraft, and persons or property on the ground.
3. At the pilot's discretion, precautionary or emergency landings may be made as necessary. The decision to make a precautionary or emergency landing, as well as the selection of the landing site, will be made by the PIC. In the event of a precautionary or emergency landing, the Air Support Unit Chief Pilot will be notified as soon as possible.

4. Ground Safety

- a. The PIC should, when possible, plan to position the helicopter in a manner that isolates the tail rotor and ensure that the tail is clear prior to turning the aircraft.
- b. During ground operations, where the aircraft is running and blades are turning, the TFO will ensure the area around the aircraft is kept clear of personnel.
- c. When possible, prior to landing or liftoff from an offsite landing area, a uniformed deputy sheriff will be stationed to the rear of the aircraft as a guard against personnel approaching the aircraft.

Q. In the event damage is caused to the aircraft while it is stored, the following procedure will be followed:

1. The 911 Center will document all information, such as who reported the damage, time and place of the incident, injuries, if any, and the amount of damage to the aircraft. The 911 Center will also notify all necessary personnel in the Air Support Unit's chain-of-command.
2. Forensic Services Unit (FSU) personnel will be notified to photograph the aircraft and/or personal injuries, if any.
3. The Chief Pilot or designee will submit a detailed *Incident Report (CCSO form-100)* to include the following:
  - a. location of the incident and the extent of damage to the aircraft and/or the surrounding area;
  - b. names of any Air Support Unit personnel present and/or witnesses to the incident;
  - c. names of person(s) injured and the extent of injuries; and
  - d. any other pertinent information.

(Ref: CALEA 41.1.3 item c)

R. Emergency Landings and Aircraft Accidents

1. In the event of an emergency landing or aircraft accident, Air Support Unit personnel will:

- a. immediately notify the 911 Center of the situation and report the exact location of the landing, if physically able;
  - b. render first aid, if possible, to injured persons;
  - c. notify the 911 Center as soon as possible, indicating the extent of injury or damage to the aircraft and surrounding property; and
  - d. request FAA and the nearest National Transportation Safety Board (NTSB) field office be notified of the accident and location.
2. Upon notification of an accident involving the Air Support Unit, the 911 Center will notify the necessary agency chain-of-command and federal authorities, such as the FAA and NTSB.
  3. Prior to the arrival of authorized FAA and NTSB representatives, Air Support Unit personnel will ensure that the aircraft and its contents are moved or disturbed only to the extent necessary to:
    - a. remove persons injured or trapped;
    - b. protect the public from injury; and
    - c. protect the aircraft from further damage.
  4. Where it is necessary to move aircraft wreckage, cargo, etc., sketches, descriptive notes, and photographs will be made, if possible, of the original positions and conditions of the wreckage and any significant impact marks.
  5. Air Support Unit personnel will provide the necessary assistance to ensure that no further damage is caused to the aircraft, should it be loaded onto a transporting vehicle, and, if practical, stay with the aircraft until it is secured in its pre-determined location.
  6. Agency personnel will provide any additional assistance or information requested by FAA or NTSB personnel on the scene.
  7. Each Air Support Unit member involved in an aircraft crash will submit a detailed report in compliance with FAA regulations, NTSB reporting procedures, and agency directives. Each unit member's

report will be disseminated to the Sheriff, via the unit's chain-of-command, for distribution to the FAA office and/or NTSB. The County Administrator will also receive copies of all written reports and correspondence to and from the FAA and/or NTSB.

8. It will be the primary responsibility of all personnel responding to an agency aircraft accident or emergency landing to quickly locate and secure the aircraft and administer aid to any injured persons.
9. The first deputy sheriff on the scene will shut off all aircraft power, if possible, should the pilot/aircrew become incapacitated. This is accomplished by placing the fuel and battery switch in the off position. The battery switch is located on the overhead panel. The fuel valve switch is located on the pilot's instrument panel.
10. After administering immediate required aid, deputy sheriffs will evaluate conditions at the scene and contact the 911 Center requesting any additional equipment or assistance.
11. If possible, documents or tapes which could be damaged should be removed from the aircraft and secured by the Air Support Unit Chief Pilot or CID Supervisor. The scene will be secured until processed and photographed by FSU personnel.
12. Upon removal of all personnel from the aircraft, sworn personnel assigned to the scene will be concerned with crowd control.
13. The 911 Center will notify the jurisdiction in which the emergency landing or accident occurred, in order that the commanding law enforcement officer of that jurisdiction can respond to the scene and assume operational control as the officer-in-charge on the scene until the shift supervisor from this agency or Air Support Unit Chief Pilot responds.
14. The deputy sheriff in charge of the scene from this agency must submit a detailed report of the incident to be forwarded to the Air Support Unit Chief Pilot for dissemination through the chain-of-command to the Sheriff. Originals are to be kept on file for reference and/or submission to the FAA, NTSB, etc.
15. All personnel assigned to the scene must submit a detailed written statement indicating the activities they performed while on the scene.

16. Voice recordings and computer printouts are available, through the 911 Center Supervisor, of all communications involving the downed aircraft beginning with the initial call at take-off and up to the completion of the securing of the scene.
17. FSU personnel will photograph the overall scene of the aircraft downing, showing specific damage incurred to the surrounding property.
18. FSU personnel will provide any additional service(s) that may be requested by the on-scene supervisor, FAA or NTSB representative investigating the downed aircraft.
19. FSU personnel will produce prints of all photographs and other documents relating to the downing incident and forward them to the Air Support Unit Chief Pilot to be disseminated as required through the chain-of-command, with an original CD of images maintained on file.