



OPERATIONAL MANUAL

OPS - 615 – UNMANNED AIRCRAFT SYSTEMS

Amends/Supersedes: OPS-615 (6/16/2025)

Date of Issue: 05/11/2026

I. GENERAL

- A. The Newport News Police Department maintains a Drone Response Unit consisting of specially trained personnel responsible for providing aerial support for department operations. The department also operates a Drone as First Responder (DFR) program, through the Real Time Crime Center. This policy includes information relative to both.
- B. Use of unmanned aircraft by the department will occur within the limits and guidelines set by the Federal Aviation Administration, federal and state legal requirements, and individual statutory and constitutional rights. See also: Virginia Code: [4.1.1.3(b)]
 - 1. [§15.2-926.3](#) Local regulation of certain aircraft.
 - 2. [§18.2-121.3](#) Trespass with an unmanned aircraft system.
 - 3. [§18.2-324.2](#) Use of unmanned aircraft system for certain purposes.
 - 4. [§19.2-60.1](#) Use of unmanned aircraft systems by public bodies; search warrant required.
- C. The unmanned aircraft owned or leased by the department, and all digital media or data captured, are the property of the City of Newport News. Unmanned aircraft deployment is restricted to authorized operational activities, department training and community demonstration. The following prohibitions apply:
 - 1. Personal use of any department unmanned aircraft is prohibited.
 - 2. Use for surveillance or investigative activities without appropriate legal authorization.
 - 3. Use that in any way violates constitutional protections, federal law, state statutes or local ordinances.
- D. The department will facilitate public access to DFR community portal via the city's website. DFR pilots complete daily flight logs documenting all missions, which are posted to the community portal within 24 hours of the log's submission.

II. DEFINITIONS

- A. *Certificate of Authorization or Waiver (COW)*: An authorization issued by the Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) to a public operator for a specific unmanned aerial activity.
- B. *Small UAS (sUAS)*: A UAS utilizing a UA weighing less than 55 pounds, and which is consistent with Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) regulations governing model aircraft.
- C. *Department Certified DFR Pilot*: licensed drone pilots who have completed department specified DFR program training and are authorized to pilot DFR missions.
- D. *Drone as First Responder (DFR)*: A program that deploys sUAS from set locations in the City of Newport News, to rapidly respond to and evaluate calls for service, and relay information to responders.

III. PROCEDURE – DEPLOYMENT OF DEPARTMENT sUAS

- A. All sUAS operations are conducted according to this policy, the Drone Unit SOP or the Drone as First Responder SOP, based on which unit is conducting the operation.



B. Scope of Operations

1. The DFR program will provide direct support for emergency calls for service and is designed to provide immediate aerial reconnaissance of priority calls prior to public safety personnel arriving on scene and to assist in the initial response.
2. The Drone Unit provides broader sUAS support for the police department depending on specific unit needs for prolonged operations and investigations.

C. Deployment Criteria & Procedure

[41.1.3(a); 41.2.5(f,g); 46.2.5; 46.2.7]

1. [§19.2-60.1](#) of the Code of Virginia establishes the criteria for the sUAS deployment by the department. Department personnel will only deploy a drone during the execution of a search warrant or other warrant stated in code unless an exception applies. This includes use of the sUAS in areas where there is no reasonable expectation of privacy.

NOTE: A warrant is not required for purposes other than law enforcement, including damage assessment, traffic assessment, flood stage assessment, and wildfire assessment. A warrant is also not required with the consent of the owner, occupant or other person with actual or apparent authority over the location to be searched.

2. sUAS may be used to provide support in the following situations without a warrant, as authorized exceptions in [§19.2-60.1](#):
 - a. When an Amber, Senior, or Blue alert activation occurs.
 - b. Emergency situations where use of an sUAS is determined as necessary to alleviate immediate danger to any person.
 - c. Conducting crash scene imagery when there is an accident where a report is required pursuant to [§ 46.2-373](#).
 - d. Aerial survey a primary residence of the subject of the arrest warrant to formulate a plan to execute an existing arrest warrant or capias for a felony offense, or locate a person sought for arrest when such person has fled from a law-enforcement officer and a law-enforcement officer remains in hot pursuit of such person
 - e. To investigate a UAS surrounding or over property of the federal or state government, public critical infrastructure as defined in [§ 44-146.28:2](#), or nongovernment-operated prison or jail facilities
 - f. For training exercises related to the above uses.
3. sUAS pilots assigned to the Real-Time Center will actively monitor calls for service within the DFR operating areas. Pilots evaluate calls for service based on call-type and priority and will deploy an sUAS to aid the call for service when DFR deployment criteria have been met, as outlined above.
4. If the on-duty supervisor determines that sUAS support is needed, they should first determine if a DFR pilot is available. DFR pilots will indicate their duty status in CAD, so this information is available through the Communications Division.
 - a. If a DFR pilot is available, the supervisor will contact RTCC directly to request assistance.
 - 1) The DFR pilot will speak with the supervisor and evaluate the request based on equipment availability, capabilities, and whether the circumstances are appropriate for the DFR. If deemed appropriate, the DFR pilot may launch the drone.
 - 2) If legality, safety and weather conditions are met but the request falls outside of the scope of the DFR program, a Drone Unit response should be requested through the Communications Division.



- b. If a DFR pilot is not available, a request for the Drone Unit is made, through the Communications Division.
 - 1) The Drone Unit commander, or designee will respond to the request by contacting the requesting supervisor to evaluate the request.
 - 2) Once information regarding the request has been collected and evaluated, the commander, or designee, determines whether the circumstances are appropriate for deployment, based on legality, safety and weather conditions.
 - 3) Once the commander, or designee, authorizes deployment, on-call team members will be notified by either the commander/designee or the Communications Division.

5. Transfer of Operations

If a sUAS mission is being operated under the DFR program but the need for sUAS coverage will last an extended period, the RTCC may contact the Drone Unit Commander to request the operation be taken over by the Drone Unit for prolonged operation.

6. External Requests

Absent a memorandum of understanding or other standing order, external requests for sUAS support and/or demonstrations will be made to the Chief of Police, or designee, and will be considered on a case-by-case basis given the criteria.

7. The sUAS Pilot, RTCC Commander, or Drone Unit commander, have the discretion to deny a support/demonstration request if it is determined that conditions are not safe to operate the sUAS.
 - a. All operations will only occur under FAA authorized conditions. This may reduce capabilities during low light situations and weather conditions that effect visibility.
 - b. Other existing air traffic in the same area is considered and de-confliction by the pilot or designee is required.

D. Image Collection/Control

1. Digital Data Captured

[83.2.2(a,c)]

- a. sUAS operators will ensure the sUAS video surveillance system records are managed under the criteria of [§19.2-60.1](#) of the Code of Virginia and requirements set out in the Virginia Records Retention Act.
- b. Digital data, including videos and flight information, from the DFR sUAS is stored and maintained by the vendor for 21 days.
 - 1) The DFR pilot will download evidentiary data and save it to Evidence.com. The case agent is responsible for ensuring the evidence is saved and properly labeled, and for following up with the RTCC within 10 days of the flight if the evidence has not already been saved to Evidence.com.
 - 2) Public safety partners will submit a request for data to the RTCC commander. The RTCC will evaluate the request and, when appropriate, provide the data in the agreed format.
- c. All digital evidence will be uploaded and stored in Evidence.com. Videos will be uploaded and labelled using guidelines in [ADM-570 Body Worn Cameras](#).
- d. Camera systems begin recording when drones are launched. During responses, pilots will consider people's civil rights and reasonable expectation of privacy. All pilots and observers will attempt to minimize the intrusion of sUAS operations on the public. DFR pilots should ensure the sUAS video cameras are pointed forward, not downward while enroute to a call for service until it arrives in the operating area.



2. Recordings relating to law enforcement incidents where criminal charges are filed are considered part of the case file associated with the case.
 3. When sUAS video files are to be held for court and/or evidentiary purposes, the operator will:
 - a. Include that information in the Evidence.com submission; and
 - b. Denote in the "Narrative" portion of the associated IBR report that a sUAS video was recorded.
 - c. If a Commonwealth Package is completed, the sUAS video from department equipment is documented in the video footage section. A video collected from non-department sUAS is documented in the evidence collected section of the package.
 4. Requests for Data Copies [82.1.1(c)]
 - a. Any request for existing sUAS digital data from the Drone Unit will be made to the Drone Unit commander, or designee.
 - b. Any request for existing sUAS digital data from the DFR program will be made to the RTCC commander, or designee. Fire department requests will be submitted to the RTCC commander.
 - c. External requests for sUAS digital data will be made according to the department approved protocol for the release of information, and in compliance with state law governing Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) requests. (See also: procedure for video file release from body-worn cameras, [ADM-570 Body Worn Cameras](#)).
 - d. All digital data files held as evidence will only be released with the written approval of the Commonwealth's Attorney's Office. This shall not affect the release of recordings pursuant to court order or subpoena.
 - e. Release of digital data information to the public will be subject to the parameters for release as defined in [ADM-160 Privacy/Dissemination of Information](#).
- E. Notifications
1. DFR pilots will attach themselves to the call and announce the DFR response on the appropriate radio channel when a sUAS has been launched to support a call for service.
 2. The Drone Unit commander, or designee, will notify the Communications Division for Drone Unit deployment of the sUAS, to include training and community demonstrations.

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