

Altmire: More Oversight Needed For Med Helicopters

U.S. Congressman Jason Altmire (PA-04) will introduce legislation this week that will help ensure patients receive quality medical care when they are transported on air ambulances.

KDKA-TV

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Medical helicopters can be a godsend, but the safety records of some for-profit operations leave much to be desired.

Recently we examined the record of a company called Air Evac Lifeteam which recently began operation in Wheeling, W. Va. and East Liverpool, Ohio, with flights into Pittsburgh trauma centers.

Our story showed that in the past 10 years, Air Evac has had a total of four fatal accidents and another 11 accidents in which the crew and passenger survived. What's more — accident investigations showed that most of those were preventable.

Congressman Jason Altmire says many for-profit or rural operations function without much oversight and take too many risks.

"Pilots coming in being unfamiliar with the territory, taking risks that they wouldn't normally make if they understood the terrain," Altmire said.

Our examination of Air Evac Lifeteam found that nine accidents resulted from pilot error or improper planning. Many of these were crashes in which the pilot descended at a too high rate or speed. Two others were the result of improper maintenance and one was due to equipment failure.

For its part, Air Evac Lifeteam says their percentage of accidents is low given the size of its operation, encompassing 82 bases in 14 states.

But Altmire wants to give state's the right to supervise these operations, making sure they provide adequate in-flight medical care and also ensuring that they are working in unison with the trauma centers.

"The purpose of the bill is to make sure that we as people who could potentially end up on one of these medical transport planes have the peace of mind of knowing that they are medically sound that they are doing the right thing and that they're not just in it for the money," Altmire said.

The National Transportation Safety Board is also holding public hearings on emergency medical helicopter services and it is expected to come out with a series of recommendations to improve safety and reduce the number of crashes.

-- Andy Sheehan, KDKA-TV