

Altmire Introduces Bill to Protect Patients on Medical Helicopters

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(WASHINGTON, D.C.) -- 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. The Helicopter Medical Services Patient Safety, Protection and Coordination Act would protect states' ability to regulate air ambulance services to ensure that they are properly equipped to meet patients' needs and are well integrated with a state's emergency and trauma systems.

In the last year, there has been a dramatic increase in the number of medical helicopter accidents and fatalities. The National Transportation Safety Board has investigated nine fatal EMS accidents with a total of 35 fatalities. In 2008 alone, there have been seven fatal accidents with 28 fatalities.

"Critically ill or injured patients who require air medical transport often need live-saving care while they are in-flight," Altmire said. "For years, states have been in charge of regulating air ambulance services, but now their ability to do this is being jeopardized. My legislation will protect patients by protecting states' power to ensure air ambulance services are properly coordinated with other emergency services and are equipped to meet patients' critical care needs."

Although states have always been in charge of regulating the on-board medical operations of both air and ground ambulances, in recent years, air ambulance services have used the Airline Deregulation Act (ADA) to successfully challenge state regulations. In North Carolina, a federal court struck down state regulations that required air ambulance services be affiliated with local trauma centers and serve patients throughout the region at all times. In other states, air ambulance services have successfully used the ADA to challenge state regulations regarding climate control in helicopters, which are critical to patient care in more humid climates.

"States currently oversee ground medical transportation, but state oversight of helicopter medical services is less defined. Medical care provided to critically ill and injured patients during transport should not be compromised just because a patient is flown by air ambulance, rather than moved by ground ambulance," said Janet Crawford RN, CRNP, MBA, MSN, Program Manager / Chief Flight Nurse for Life Lion Critical Care Transport Services, Penn State Milton S. Hershey Medical Center. "We applaud Congressman Altmire's leadership in introducing legislation to clarify the line between State and Federal oversight and help ensure the public has access to a safer and more competent air medical emergency care system."

Altmire's legislation will ensure that the ADA can no longer be used to undermine states' regulations. Specifically, it will preserve states' power to regulate the qualifications of medical personnel on board, ensure air transport vehicles are properly outfitted to meet patients' needs, and restrict the number of air ambulance providers to prevent a duplication in services and possible crashes.

