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Providing sound safety management strategies

Since 2006, Air Methods has invested in aircraft technologies and operational control center capabilities and is proud to be out in front of any FAA regulations to install these technologies. The same can be said of Air Methods' proactive steps toward implementing a Safety Management System (SMS).

In June 2006, the FAA published the, "Introduction to Safety Management Systems for Air Operators," which contains information for operators to develop SMS programs voluntarily. The AC introduces the concept of an SMS to aviation service providers, including air taxi operators, and provides guidance for SMS development. This AC is not mandatory and does not constitute a regulation. It is purely voluntary. Air Methods has already started to implement the recommended FAA quality management programs and tools to control risk.

SMS initiatives

One of the company's top priorities is the establishment of an Aviation Safety Action Program (ASAP) program. Often used by major airlines, the ASAP is a voluntary, self-reporting program designed to identify and reduce possible flight safety concerns. ASAP uses employee input to identify significant safety concerns and issues; operational deficiencies; noncompliance with regulations; deviations from company policies and procedures; and unusual events. If the report meets the acceptance criteria of the program it is investigated, recommendations are proposed and corrective actions are determined.

Another program up for consideration is the Line Oriented Safety Audit (LOSA). This methodology utilizes trained observers riding in the cockpit to evaluate several aspects of crew performance. The in-flight observer's record the various threats encountered by the crew, types of errors committed, and most importantly, they record how flight crews manage these situations to maintain safety.

The Flight Safety Foundation, an independent, nonprofit, international organization engaged in research, auditing, education, advocacy and publishing to improve aviation safety, received a major donation from an investor who dedicated a million dollars for aviation safety research. The Foundation will use some of the gift to fund a program that will be used to support some near-term work on the safety of helicopter emergency medical services (HEMS) operations by trying to help bring some of the data gathering and analysis techniques from airline and corporate aviation to the HEMS industry. The Foundation came to Air Methods for help with an analysis on how to implement Flight Operations Quality Assurance (FOQA) program at HEMS operators. FOQA is a method of capturing and analyzing the data generated by an aircraft, similar to a "black box." Many U.S. airlines have initiated FOQA programs to collect, store and analyze recorded

flight data. Air Methods hopes to improve its overall safety, increase maintenance effectiveness and reduce operational costs through the FOQA program.

Internal initiatives

To ensure all employees, from the base level and up, fully understand the company's safety policy, a monthly newsletter, Safety Connect, has been implemented. This newsletter will be one of many vehicles the company will use to communicate safety specific information concerning the company and industry to employees. The Silent Whistle program is another new tool. An executive Safety Council, chaired by the CEO, also was recently formed and meets regularly at headquarters to provide strategic oversight to SMS and the safety department. Another continuous improvement initiative is the Root Cause Analysis (RCA) program team which meets monthly. RCA is aimed at identifying the root causes of incidents, problems and/or events. RCA is predicated on the belief that problems are best solved by attempting to correct or eliminate root causes, as opposed to merely addressing the immediately obvious symptoms. It is hoped that the likelihood of problem recurrence will be minimized. Finally, many in the industry are asking about Traffic Collision Avoidance Systems (TCAS) and Air Methods is evaluating timelines, costs, and installation options in order to make a recommendation. Within the next couple weeks the FAA is visiting Air Methods to review and chart where the company is with the SMS plan and implementation. The FAA is looking to Air Methods to lead on HEMS issues and be proactive in finding resolutions. Many of these programs are recognized as an FAA Voluntary Safety Program and as an industry best practice. Air Methods is proud to be in front of the curve.