

## **In California Access to Emergency Air Ambulance Service at Risk if AB 583 Sunsets**

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**AB 583:** Air ambulance services provide lifesaving emergency transportation to the most critical patients directly to trauma centers. In addition, emergency helicopter air ambulance providers provide a critical link between rural health facilities and urban hospitals. Some emergency patients transported by air ambulances have no insurance, are not eligible for Medi-Cal and have no ability to pay for the service, yet because of the existing revenue source, these patients are given the same high level care as those with medical insurance. AB 583 guarantees the state will continue to fund air ambulance services, ensuring anyone in need can access these crucial services, not just those who can afford it.

June 10, 2017 - Sacramento, CA. – On Friday, members of California’s network of emergency air medical providers are assessing how dramatically their ability to care for patients will be impacted if one of their primary sources of funding is not renewed by the California Legislature.

The Emergency Medical Air Transportation Act (EMATA) was established in 2010 to specifically fund emergency air ambulance services by placing a \$4 fee on moving violations. The EMATA program sunsets on December 31, 2017, unless renewed by the Legislature. Legislation introduced by Assemblymember **Jim Wood** (D-Healdsburg) that would extend the sunset for this crucial fund is currently stalled in the Assembly.

The fee generates approximately \$8 million for California’s emergency medical helicopter network, and allows the state to receive an additional \$8 million in matching funds from the federal government. Without this funding, air medical bases are at risk of closure.

“We recognize that the fees being tacked on to traffic tickets have become excessive, but without a funding source, we risk making these services, that are often the difference between life and death, available to only the wealthy and privileged,” said Asm. Wood. “We must find a solution for this critical piece of our state’s infrastructure.”

A significant number of patients transported by emergency air medical services are only covered by California’s Medi-Cal program. The reimbursement rates from Medi-Cal were last adjusted more than 20 years ago. Should the EMATA program be allowed to expire, critical funding that minimizes the gap between Medi-Cal reimbursement and the actual cost of services will be cut by more than half, which could result in reduction of services and even force the closure of air medical bases.

Reduction or elimination of air medical services will disproportionately impact rural areas that do not have immediate access to trauma centers and children's hospitals throughout the state – putting some of California's most vulnerable residents at risk.

"In rural areas, emergency helicopters play a vital role in EMS and our ability to get the most critical patients to a hospital in time to save them. Traffic accidents, in places like the roads to Yosemite National Park, present a unique challenge to us, where we are a long way from a trauma center," said Bill Caldera, EMT-P and chief operations officer, Tuolumne County Ambulance Service. "A \$4 fee on moving violations seems like a small price to continue paying to ensure we do not lose access to these lifesaving services."

Air ambulances also play a critical role in transferring patients from rural and community hospitals to receive trauma care or specialized treatment they may not have access to in their area.

"We strongly support the EMATA program as a way to fund air ambulance services. We have two good community hospitals in Imperial County, but when we have a critically ill or injured patient, we rely heavily on air ambulances to get them to larger hospitals in San Diego or Palm Springs," said Chuck Peraza, Fire Chief, City of Brawley in Imperial County. "Because it's like comparing the cost of a cup of coffee to the possibility of losing this lifesaving service, the legislature should act quickly to ensure this program remains intact."

Air medical services are an integral part of California's emergency response infrastructure throughout the state.

"Access to emergency air transport can mean the difference between life and death for trauma patients, or someone suffering a stroke or cardiac event. For these medical conditions, a few minutes of time can make all the difference," said Dr. Jim Hinsdale, M.D., San Jose trauma surgeon and former president of the California Medical Association. "Whether you are driving along the North Coast Highway, hiking the Sierras, ATV riding in the Mojave Desert, or simply caught behind gridlock traffic, having an emergency helicopter available can save valuable minutes, and maybe even your life."

Several organizations support the extension of EMATA, including the California Children's Hospital Association, the California League of Cities, the California Fire Chiefs Association, the California Hospital Association, the Rural County Representatives of California, the California Chapter of the American College of Emergency Physicians, Save Our Air Medical Resources (SOAR), and others.

Proponents are asking the Legislature to extend the fee to protect this vital funding.

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