



UNMANNED AIRCRAFT SYSTEMS IN POLICING

What are some necessary steps for successfully acquiring a small unmanned aircraft system with the community's support?

Policing Issue

Police departments believe that small unmanned aircraft systems (sUAS) have the potential to greatly enhance law enforcement operations focused on ensuring the public's safety. However, departments interested in acquiring these unmanned aircraft systems (UAS) are confronting widespread community concerns over potential violations of privacy. While some police departments have failed to acquire sUAS technology without facing significant community backlash, other departments have been much more successful in implementing their sUAS programs by following community policing principles in acquiring the technology.

Methodology

Five regional community-oriented focus groups were convened in 2014 to discuss the emerging use of sUAS technology for public safety. These focus groups addressed topics such as how sUAS can help with policing operations, ways in which community members would like to be engaged by police to discuss sUAS policy, and how to achieve consensus building, among other topics. Selected sites had to meet certain criteria agreed upon by both the Police Foundation and the COPS office. One of these criteria was that each police chief had to invite a representative of a community organization that had previously engaged their department on community policing issues to participate in the focus group. The selected regional focus group sites were: Draper City (Utah) Police Department (Midwest); Los Gatos (California) Police Department (West Coast); Milliken (Colorado) Police Department (Mountain); Morristown (New Jersey) Police Department (Mid-Atlantic); and San Bernardino Sheriff's Department (Southern California/West Coast).

Findings

The regional focus groups provided the following recommended steps to the continual development and maintenance of trust between police and their communities around the use of unmanned aircraft systems for public safety:

Language: Carefully consider the language that will be used in constructing the UAS narrative the department will present to community stakeholders. "The introduction to the public is critical; you mess up that first step and you're going to be hard pressed to recover," said one focus group member.

Communication: Most of the focus group participants believe that the biggest community concern police will come across is the apprehension over privacy violations; therefore, it is important that all UAS policies be transparent and that police personnel be knowledgeable and able to communicate their knowledge about the legal aspects surrounding UAS.

Preparation: Anticipate opposition or concerns throughout the process and be proactive and prepared to address it. Whenever possible, address community questions and concerns before they come up.

Transparency: What information is going to be collected? How long is it going to be retained? Who will be able to see it? What will it be used for? These are the questions that community members will want answered by the police to trust that they are being transparent about the use of sUAS in the community.

Impact: Document information on deployments, successes, failures, and the reasons for each. Collecting this data will allow a department to provide information on community impact, whether good or bad.

Implications for policing

As with almost any technology, the use of UAS poses challenges and liability risks for law enforcement. The legal and legitimacy implications of new technologies are often under-considered by law enforcement prior to adoption. In order for communities to be open to the use of sUAS by law enforcement, the public safety benefits of their use must clearly outweigh any potential risks. These risks include injury to persons or property, violation of a person's right to privacy, and First Amendment violations, among others. It is incumbent upon law enforcement agencies to obtain community input into law enforcement sUAS programs and to ensure that accountability measures are in place.

Contact for more information:

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