



FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE
December 11, 2023

61% of LAPD Helicopter Flight Time Spent on Non-High Priority Incidents, at a Taxpayer Cost of Nearly \$50 Million Per Year, Sizeable Climate Impact - Controller Kenneth Mejia Releases Audit on LAPD Helicopter Program

LA City Controller Kenneth Mejia today released an audit of the **Los Angeles Police Department's (LAPD)** airborne operation, the **Air Support Division (ASD)**, or helicopter program.

Go to the LAPD Helicopter Audit:
bit.ly/heli-audit

This is the Controller's Office's first-ever audit of the LAPD helicopter program. The audit was launched in response to calls from community members and organizations who requested more information regarding the costs and performance of LAPD helicopters. The audit focused on the LAPD's use of helicopters from FYs 2018-2022 and explored whether the LAPD has justified the need for the program's current size and scope, which consists of 17 helicopters and more than 90 employees.

Despite spending an average of \$46.6 million every year on ASD, there is limited external oversight or monitoring of ASD, its policies, practices, or whether the program, which was officially established in the 1970s, is in line with the City's present-day needs. Since LAPD first began using helicopters in 1956, its fleet has expanded from 1 helicopter to 17. With no comprehensive, external audit of the helicopter program until now, inefficiencies, data reliability issues, and lack of transparency and performance monitoring have gone unchecked.

Unlike most jurisdictions, the City operates its helicopter fleet on an almost continuous basis. Typically, there are two helicopters flying for 20 hours every day of the year. The helicopters logged an average of 16,000 hours of flight time each year at a cost of \$2,916 per flight hour.

The audit's findings strongly suggest that the LAPD's current use of helicopters causes significant harm to the community without meaningful or reliable assessment of the benefits it may or may not deliver.

The audit shows significant areas of concern with ASD, including but not limited to:

- The audit found that the ASD program costs nearly \$50 million annually while most of the flight time is devoted to low priority events. The estimated annual cost to operate the helicopter program is \$46.6 million (\$127,805 per day). It costs \$2,916 per flight hour. There are 14 City departments whose annual budgets each do not reach this amount;
- 61% of flight time was dedicated to activities not associated with the highest priority incidents, such as transportation flights, general patrol time, and ceremonial flights. Only 39% of flight time was dedicated to high priority crime types;
- Some transportation and ceremonial flights were an inefficient, inappropriate use of City funds, (including passenger shuttle flights for a “Chili Fly-In”, a fly-by at a golf tournament, a roundtrip helicopter transport of two high ranking LAPD officials from LAPD headquarters in Downtown LA to a meeting at the Harbor Community police station);
- There were 783 ceremonial “fly-by” activities, which are flights over a ceremony or event. These fly-by activities included, in part, LAPD events like academy graduations, retirement ceremonies, and police station events as well as community events and golf tournaments. For at least 161 of the fly-by activities, there was not enough information to determine what category of activity took place.
- Helicopters spend a disproportionate amount of time in certain communities when compared to other areas and levels of alleged crime;
- There is no persuasive empirical evidence that shows a clear link between helicopter patrols and crime reduction, and the LAPD has not done the work to collect necessary data to test such claims. Neither the Controller’s Office nor the LAPD can demonstrate that police helicopters actually deter crime in the City;
- ASD helicopters burn approximately 761,600 gallons of fuel per year (based on ASD flying 16,000 hours per year) and release approximately 7,427 metric tons of carbon dioxide equivalent per year (equivalent to over 19 million miles driven by gasoline-powered passenger cars). They burn approximately 47.6 gallons of fuel per hour;
- ASD patrols flout best practices for mitigating nuisance noise by flying below the recommended distance above ground level. There is evidence that helicopters can have a negative quality of life impact on the lives of residents who live in communities with frequent helicopter activity. Long-term noise exposure to aircrafts can lead to: decreased sleep quality, increased stress, cognitive impairment, reduced metabolism, and cardiovascular disease (i.e., heart attack, stroke, heart disease, etc.);
- LAPD does not have a formal contract with its flight log application vendor, raising ethical, legal, and other concerns. Without a contract, flight related data may be accessed by unauthorized persons and can be misused or withheld from the LAPD;
- There are significant issues with flight data collection and monitoring.

The audit makes recommendations for (1) reducing inefficiencies, (2) improving data collection and management, and (3) boosting transparency and performance monitoring, including but not limited to:

- Establish a formal set of performance metrics and performance goals that are routinely gathered, assessed, and made public so that residents, policymakers, the Board of Police Commissioners, LAPD management, and ASD can monitor on a regular basis;
- Complete a formal assessment of air support needs for patrol and incident response operations to evaluate the program's current operations and whether rightsizing opportunities exist;
- Revise existing data fields or establish new data fields in the Daily Flight Log to allow ASD to track responses to Part I crimes, and responses where the ASD aircrew is directly responsible for an apprehension or recovery of a firearm;
- Update the ASD Manual to establish policies for the planning and authorization of directed patrols, fly-bys, and administrative flights.

With this audit, the City now has the information needed to determine whether an airborne program this big, this costly, and this damaging to its environment is necessary.

Audits & Assessments from the Office of LA City Controller Kenneth Mejia:

[LAPD Helicopters](#)

[Interim Housing and Shelter Bed Data](#)

Implementation of TAHO (In progress)

Unarmed Response (In progress)

Pathways to Permanent Housing (In progress)