

*Airlife of Greeley Medical
Transport Helicopter*



People in remote areas of Colorado, Wyoming, Nebraska, and even Kansas have survived thanks to their fast expert response. Since 1982, AirLife of Greeley has airlifted thousands of people from their base at North Colorado Medical Center, providing acute aeromedical services within a 300 mile radius.

airlife is twenty-five!

by Maryjo Faith Morgan


Awards point to hard work and exacting safety standards. AirLife, accredited by the Commission on Accreditation of Medical Transport Systems since 1996, has flown incident free for over 15,000 consecutive flights.

Dr. Tim Hutchison, AirLife's Medical Director, praises the highly specialized team. "After an intensive initial six-week training, our nurses and paramedics are constantly rotating through anesthesiology, radiology, or intensive care and cardiac units, gaining knowledge and skill. They are the cream of the crop."


He confirms that the scope of their service extends to outlying areas that may have a nurse practitioner but no physician. "The beauty of it is that we can airlift someone who lives out at Pawnee Buttes or Walden, and cut their travel time to the hospital in half. The combined capabilities of crew and helicopter exceed a regular ambulance. Also, the closest pediatric intensive care unit is in Denver, so we transport an average of 100 critical care children there each year."

"Safety is a huge part of what we do ... safety is a comprehensive endeavor." Hutchison credits pilots, flight crews who work within the tiny spaces of the helicopter, dispatchers, the many rural volunteer firemen, EMT's and especially, volunteers. "They are willing to go out at 2:00 am on a freezing night and help somebody who rolled their car. These are some of the finest people I have ever associated with."

In a recent issue of *AirLife of Greeley-MedNews* a list thanking local fire departments, hospitals, ambulance services, search and rescue and park rangers speaks to the dedication and continuously coordinated group effort of area responders to peak safety performance.



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As a paramedic, Chip Brownlee knows his team can have a huge impact on a patient's ultimate outcome. In cases of heart attack the crew can perform an EKG right there in the helicopter, utilize the cardiac alert system to relay results to the hospital, and make pre-landing arrangements. They take the patient directly to the cath lab upon arrival. Brownlee cites the use of diagnostic ultrasounds to facilitate immediate triage, early recognition and intervention to interrupt a stroke. "Timely intervention could make the difference whether the patient survives or not, with or without a disability."

Pilot Carl Tofoya has complete confidence in AirLife's red, white and blue Bell 407. "This aircraft is one of the few that works well in the mountains... the higher you go, the more engine you need and the harder the aircraft has to work. The pilot has to be vigilant, thinking about it [weather] all the time because it does change so quickly." However, they do not hesitate to ground the flight for safety's sake when necessary. The 407, known for its maneuverability, speed and superior performance, has been outfitted with a Real Time Satellite Tracking System and a patient loading system to facilitate a streamlined process.

Daniel Beckle, RN, EMT-P says for the patient it is totally different than riding in a plane. "The blades provide your lift so there is no bouncing around." He says their passengers comment, "This isn't bad at all."

The crew find work at this level of critical care demanding but exhilarating; each call is different.

Lyn Maier, Program Director/Chief Flight Nurse says a significant volume of their cases are trauma or cardiac, "It's all about time. The sooner the patient is in a definitive care facility, the better the outcome for the patient." The proliferation of cell phones, seatbelt use and cars with built-in stabilizers, enhanced steering and side curtain air bags greatly improve outcomes, too.

Ken Klein and his wife JoAnne, both certified wilderness first responders with Larimer County Search and Rescue, have participated in numerous evacuations. "A helicopter eliminates a tough 12-hour carryout over rugged terrain."

Many area first-responder agencies such as fire and police departments, offer helicopter safety training annually. Safety is a priority for everyone,



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Paramedic crew loads a patient aboard AirLife

on the ground and in the aircraft. "Those blades never stop moving, and an updraft can change to a downdraft in the vortex beneath the rotors. You have to think about what debris will get kicked up by the helicopter." To bring the aircraft into an exact area they utilize radio, GPS coordinates, specific arm signals and even signal mirrors. Klein

"It's all about time. The sooner the patient is in a definitive care facility, the better the outcome for the patient."

-- Lyn Maier, Program Director/Chief Flight Nurse

says ground crews learn how to prepare a landing zone in the field. They want everything ready so the helicopter can land, load, and take off. "It only takes them a matter of minutes. They're good."

Rocky Mountain National Park sees 3 million visitors a year. Chief Ranger Mark Magnuson says only about a dozen incidents a year that occur in remote areas warrant a rapid evacuation with the high level of care provided by an air ambulance. "We rely on them."

In fact, all of Northern Colorado relies on them. ■

Maryjo Faith Morgan is a freelance writer happy to be living in Loveland.

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