Keys to a Successful Government UAS Program

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Municipalities can use Unmanned Aircraft System (UAS, or "drones") for a wide range of support services if they begin by taking the appropriate steps and obtain the necessary approvals. Such services may include:

- Crime, accident and fire scene investigation and documentation
- Search and rescue operations
- Law enforcement surveillance
- Fire suppression activities
- Tactical advantage and live imaging in hostile situations
- Monitoring and inspection of infrastructure
- Aerial photography, filming of events
- Property inspections and appraisals
- Water & sewer surveying
- GPS land mapping

The changing legal environment and interaction of federal and state law can make it difficult for government leaders to address legitimate privacy and safety concerns. In order to be successful, consider the following key factors:

KNOW THE LAW

Each state has its own laws regarding UAS use, some quite extensive while others have very few, if any at all. It is imperative to know the applicable laws before embarking on the task of creating a UAS program.

DON'T REINVENT THE WHEEL

Creating a successful UAS program is difficult enough. Several municipalities and agencies have successfully procured UAS programs and there are services available to assist you in this

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process. When feasible, reach out to organizations with programs in place as well as legal and technical experts. It may be possible to adapt what they have put into practice so you can avoid more work than necessary.

TRANSPARENCY

As you work your way toward a fully functional program, it is important to maintain transparency with your community whenever possible. Put out a press release announcing the program's goals and purposes and invite open communication. This will show the community that the aircraft will be a tool to serve the public rather than something to be feared.

EDUCATE YOURSELF AND OTHERS

Federal regulations, government policies, training practices and municipal procedures are among the many constantly moving parts that make up a successful UAS program. While it is vital that the individuals responsible for the program are highly knowledgeable in all of these areas, it is also very important that other departments and groups within the municipality are educated on its many aspects. They will, after all, be actively working alongside the program.

BECOME FAMILIAR WITH THE SYSTEM

As complex as the UAS process is, it is important to become familiar with its many different aspects. The program will be easier to manage and move along more quickly if you become proficient in completing the COA application, get on good terms with the Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) UAS representatives, and become acquainted with the overall process.

WORK WITH OTHERS

The FAA has certain piloting requirements for operating an unmanned aircraft. It is beneficial for government agencies to establish cooperative agreements with flight schools and FAA

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medical examiners in an effort to mitigate cost, while also creating a stable support system.

BE PATIENT

Be patient with the process. To create an effective and useful government UAS program requires many steps to be completed. This will take time and will require a good deal of persistence. Those who can manage both will be rewarded with a tool equivalent to that of a manned aviation unit, but at a fraction of the cost.

Justin Robinson is a Network Specialist with the Police and Fire Department for Murfreesboro, Tennessee. He led a two-year effort to implement an unmanned aircraft program for his city, which led to the recent approval by the FAA for full operational use of drones in support of government services.

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