

Frequently asked questions about the Air Support Unit

1. When does the Unit fly and how often?
 - The Unit is operational every day, including holidays, from 08:00 AM to 02:30 AM, and is airborne approximately 10 hours each day.
2. How big is the Air Support Unit and where is their base of operation?
 - The Unit currently operates a fleet of four helicopters and two airplanes with 12 officers, two sergeants and two mechanics. The police helicopter named, “ABLE” (Air Borne Law Enforcement), is located at Montgomery Field at 4141 Kearny Villa Road in San Diego.
3. What type of calls does the helicopter respond to?
 - The helicopter responds to priority police calls or emergency calls within the City of San Diego. The aircrew also responds to various types of patrol calls such as crimes in progress, vehicle pursuits, and searching for missing persons.
4. How effective is the police helicopter at police calls? Is the helicopter really necessary?
 - Last year, the police helicopter responded to over 8,300 calls for service and was the first police unit on scene almost 50% of the time. In one year, the helicopter was involved in the arrest of 2,100 suspects. 600 of the 2,100 suspects were captured solely because the helicopter was overhead. If not for the rapid response of the helicopter, and their high tech equipment, these suspects would most likely have eluded capture.
5. Why can't the helicopter just park at the airport and take off when called for service?
 - Every day, the helicopter is constantly responding to requests for air support from ground units from the Wild Animal Park to the U.S. Border. Since the helicopter is always working from call to call, the response time of the helicopter to any emergency or crime in progress is very quick. A response from the ground takes approximately 17 minutes since a helicopter start up takes a great deal of time.
6. The police helicopter was over my house flying in circles at night, but I did not see them use the spotlight. Were they working some sort of radio call?
 - If the police helicopter is flying overhead in circles, they are working some sort of mission. The spotlight, called a Night Sun, is just one of many tools the helicopter has to complete a mission. Depending on the mission, the helicopter may or may not use the Night Sun.
7. If the helicopter is overhead, who can I call to see what is going on?
 - All non-emergency police inquiries should be made to police communications center at (619) 531-2000. The dispatcher can briefly tell you what police units are working, but cannot answer specific questions about patrol units or the helicopter.
8. What should I do if I can't hear or understand the public address announcement from the helicopter?
 - The helicopter uses a 700 watt speaker system that is directed to the left side of the helicopter. If the helicopter is making announcement in your area, the announcement should be very clear. If you have any questions about the announcement, please ask an officer or call the non-emergency police phone number at (619) 531-2000. If you see the suspect in question from the P.A. announcements, please call 911.

9. At what altitude does the Unit fly and why?

- Although most police air units fly much lower, ABLE usually flies missions at approximately 1500 feet during the day and 2000 feet after 11 PM to help alleviate helicopter noise. However, at times, air traffic controllers will instruct the helicopter to fly at or below 1500 feet to give safe separation from airliners coming into San Diego.

10. What are the laws regarding police helicopter noise?

- Police helicopters are exempt from noise complaints per all State and Federal rules. Although the Department is exempt, the Unit takes many proactive measures to minimize aircraft noise to the citizens of San Diego. Aircrews fly at the highest operational altitudes allowed in controlled air space. They also avoid going lower into residential areas unless working a priority radio call.

11. Why do helicopters frequently fly over the University Heights and Normal Heights areas?

- These communities are in controlled airspace for Lindbergh Field. In this area, helicopters must usually fly at or below 1500 feet to avoid airliner traffic above. The community is also near many transition points, such as the North-South airport transition point, I-805 and I-15 corridors for traffic helicopters, and many hospital approaches (military and civilian). SDPD's ABLE always tries to avoid the area and fly much higher than other helicopters to alleviate any helicopter noise.

12. Who else flies helicopters in the San Diego area?

- After three years of data collection, a good portion of noise complaints that come into the San Diego Police Department are not caused by the police helicopter. San Diego is home to many other local, state, and federal law enforcement helicopters working on various police missions and border security operations. There are also several fire, rescue, and medievac helicopters that operate daily in the area during lifesaving missions. Lastly, there are also many news helicopters, private charters, and construction type aircraft that fly in the area.

13. Once I have confirmed the helicopter in question was ABLE, where can I voice my concerns about the police helicopter noise?

- You may call a supervisor of the Air Support Unit to voice your concerns. The supervisor will look into the incident and see if there is a better course of action the Unit could take. An Air Support Supervisor can be reached during weekdays. Daytime: (858) 573-5078 or Evenings: (858) 573-5079.