

May 21, 2009

(WASHINGTON, D.C.) -- U.S. Congressman Jason Altmire (PA-04) is continuing to make progress in his ongoing effort to ensure air ambulances are safely transporting critically ill and injured patients. A provision written by Congressman Altmire that forces the government to study the safety of air ambulances passed the House today as part of the Federal Aviation Administration's Reauthorization Act (H.R. 915) by a vote of 277-136. As a member of the House Transportation Subcommittee on Aviation, Altmire is leading the fight to ensure that states can coordinate helicopter medical services and that air ambulances are equipped to meet patients' critical care needs.

“In recent years, there have been numerous incidences where the safety of critical patients was compromised because air ambulances did not coordinate properly with local hospitals or were not adequately equipped to deliver medical care,” Altmire said. “By conducting an in-depth examination of America’s emergency medical helicopter industry, we can move forward to ensure that patients receive quality care.”

There are numerous stories illustrating patient safety problems in America's air medical system. For example, patients have suffered – and in some cases died – because they were forced to wait for a specific company's helicopter even though there were other transport options available. Additionally, there are cases in which infants have arrived at hospitals with temperatures 10 degrees below normal because a helicopter was not properly heated.

As part of the study Altmire has requested, the U.S. Comptroller General will examine the makeup of the air ambulance industry, whether helicopters are being efficiently and safely dispatched, and whether helicopters have the equipment and personnel needed to deliver quality care. The report must be submitted to Congress and the Department of Transportation by June 1, 2010. Within 60 days of the report's completion, the Secretary of Transportation must specify what policy changes are called for and what legislation is needed to improve patient safety.

Altmire has led the fight to strengthen oversight of the helicopter medical services industry. In February, Altmire introduced legislation that would give states the ability to regulate the coordination, on-board capabilities, and personnel qualifications of air ambulance services. The introduction of Altmire's bill helped prompt the House Transportation Subcommittee on Aviation to hold a hearing in April examining the emergency medical helicopter industry.