

Get Your Air Unit Accreditation

After six years of work by a group of aviation law enforcement professionals, the Airborne Law Enforcement Accreditation Commission is now accepting applications for accreditation of law enforcement air units in the U.S.

By Jim Di Giovanna, President, Airborne Law Enforcement Accreditation Commission

In 2002, Kevin Means had a vision. President of the Airborne Law Enforcement Association at the time, his vision was to develop standards for law enforcement air units.

Means envisioned a system similar to the law enforcement standards established by the Commission on Accreditation for Law Enforcement Agencies, Peace Officer Standards and Training, and others. In the same manner that the standards adopted by these associations provide a guidepost for law enforcement excellence, the standards envisioned by Means would provide air units a benchmark against which to compare their operational, training and crewmember certification practices. After six years of work, his vision has become a reality.

A New Commission

The Airborne Law Enforcement Accreditation Commission (ALEAC) is a nonprofit California corporation, formed under the provisions of IRS Code 501(c) 6, and now a subsidiary of ALEA. The Commission consists of a team of law enforcement aviation professionals whose core values are focused on the development of a single standard of safety for all airborne law enforcement units in the U.S. and Canada. The Commission is also committed to providing guidance and direction to all airborne law enforcement units seeking recognition of compliance with these standards through an accreditation process.

ALEAC, initially headed by Means, has authored professional standards for law enforcement aviation operations that are applicable to all airborne law enforcement units, regardless of size or level of government. At the July 2005 ALEA board meeting in Reno, NV, the ALEA Board of Directors formally adopted the standards developed by ALEAC as the industry best-practice standards for the airborne law enforcement profession.

The adoption of these standards paved the way for ALEAC to continue working toward a program through which air units could obtain accreditation, thereby validating their operation as meeting the best practice standards. The standards are designed to provide units a foundation of safe operating practices in the performance of their agency's mission. The standards were formulated on what have been identified as the two highest priorities of an airborne law enforcement unit:

- 1 "Safety First" in all aspects of the operation.
- 2 Providing effective aviation support services in the furtherance of the agency's law enforcement mission.

ALEAC's commitment to these priorities forms the foundation of the standards and the Accreditation Program. Each standard is supported by and evaluated against measurable objectives. Recommendations and guidelines are also offered as further explanation of the standard's intent.

At the recommendation of ALEA Safety Program Manager Keith Johnson, the standards were recently modified to incorporate safety management systems (SMS) into the chapter on safety and elsewhere throughout the document as needed. The ALEA Board of Directors adopted these modifications, and the standards have been updated to include the changes.

In July 2008, the ALEAC held its annual meeting in Houston, TX, during the ALEA Annual Conference. Several items were on the agenda, including the submission of the Accreditation Policy and Procedures Manual to the ALEA Board of Directors for approval. In the months leading up to the annual meeting, the Commission made considerable progress in its development and final adoption. This manual will act as a guide in accepting and processing accreditation applications, hiring and training assessors, conducting audits, evaluating findings and determining a unit's status toward accreditation.

The manual was submitted to the ALEA Board of Directors for their review at the start of the ALEA Annual Conference last year. Because of the efforts of Dan Schwarzbach, ALEA President, and a majority of the Board of Directors, the work of the ALEAC will be performed under the umbrella of ALEA. As a result, the Commission has solicited and retained four assessors who will be responsible for conducting onsite unit assessments once accreditation applications are received.

THE ACCREDITATION PROGRAM

The Accreditation Program developed by the ALEAC is designed to objectively evaluate and certify a unit's overall compliance with the standards as developed and adopted by the ALEAC and ALEA. The intent of the program is to encourage safe, efficient and accident-free aviation operations in support of law enforcement missions. The Commission is dedicated to fairly reviewing and evaluating the relevancy and applicability of the standards as they apply to each unit evaluated.

The voluntary process of becoming accredited can generally be divided into two parts: adoption of the standards and the unit assessment process. The standards, as outlined in the adopted Standards Manual (Standards for Law Enforcement Aviation Units) are the building blocks from which everything else evolves.

The unit assessment process of accreditation provides a blueprint by which a unit can build the standards into a foundation that forms a base of operation, provides a vital safety structure and becomes a measuring device of excellence, quality, safety and effective service. The assessment process provides an orderly system of inspection, reports and recommendations to those going through the program and ensures that ALEAC can recognize professional achievement and compliance with standards in a consistent and uniform manner.

Prior to applying for accreditation, agencies may request information on the process from the ALEAC secretary, who will provide a free information package. The package includes a complete set of the standards, descriptive information about the accreditation process, fee schedule and a description of the steps in the process leading to full accreditation. All of this information will also be made available on the ALEA website.

There are five steps or phases in the accreditation process: application, self-assessment, on-site assessment, commission review and maintaining compliance.

Once accredited, the client agency is awarded a certificate of accreditation by the Commission, which encourages the agency to arrange for a formal presentation ceremony with the agency's department head. Accreditation is valid for a period of three years.

AUDIT SERVICES

In addition to the accreditation program, ALEAC will also offer an aviation unit audit service in which an air unit can request the services of the ALEAC to examine the unit's entire operation. The service is intended to provide information to the unit's management team about the unit's compliance with safety and operational standards through evaluation of the unit's overall operation when compared to the ALEAC standards. The audit is primarily for informational purposes. It is not a prerequisite, nor will it have any bearing on, a unit's future application for accreditation.

Auditors will not be permitted to discuss unit information, their findings or reports with anyone other than the unit commander or his/her designee, staff and unit members. The auditor's report is considered proprietary information and will be sent directly to the unit commander by the auditor. A copy of the report will be kept on file at the ALEAC office for quality improvement purposes only.

Units that contract with the Commission for audit services are not required to apply for accreditation, and the auditor's role does not guarantee any accreditation outcome. Additional information regarding audit services will be made available in subsequent announcements.

Questions regarding the Accreditation Program or the application process can be directed to ALEAC President Jim Di Giovanna or Secretary Don Roby.

Side Bars:

What units are eligible for accreditation?

Any governmental law enforcement agency engaged in aviation support operations for a minimum of one year is eligible for accreditation. The following units of government may apply:

- 1 A federal, state, county, parish, provincial or municipal (city) law enforcement agency operating an aviation unit within the U.S. and its territories or Canada (by late 2009).
- 2 A government entity that owns/leases and operates (for 90 continuous days or longer) aircraft engaged in support of civil law enforcement activities.

What are the benefits of accreditation?

Safe and efficient law enforcement aviation operations.

- provides agencies with a foundation upon which a culture of safe operating practices may be formulated, along with a marker of excellence to further develop the unit's professionalism, economic efficiency and overall effectiveness

Greater accountability within the agency.

- provides the department head with a proven management system of written policies and directives, safe operating practices, sound training principles, personnel qualification requirements, clearly defined lines of authority and examples of accepted industry standards that support decision-making and resource allocation

Controlled liability insurance costs.

- allows agencies greater flexibility when purchasing aviation and liability insurance, increases the liability limits of insurance coverage and may result in lower premiums

Stronger support from government officials.

- establishes credibility as a professional aviation operation providing safe, cost-effective, and essential aviation support to law enforcement operations in a variety of missions
- potential for further partnerships

The Commission is engaged in dialogue with the aviation insurance industry and ALEA affiliate members in an effort to forge a partnership that could result in product discounts or other incentives for agencies that successfully complete the accreditation process.

Who are the onsite assessors and what are their qualifications?

ALEAC assessors must always demonstrate a commitment to the principles and advancement of the airborne law enforcement industry. Individuals selected as assessors must possess the highest standards of aviation and law enforcement professionalism and have an established background in airborne law enforcement. To accomplish these objectives, the commissioners selected Keith Johnson, ALEA Safety Program Manager, as the lead assessor. Johnson's position was created to ensure that the assessors selected to conduct unit assessments would be fully trained and qualified to complete the task. As the program grows, additional assessors will be selected from a pool of applicants who respond to online solicitation. Those selected will be required to meet the following minimum qualifications:

- Professional member (retired or active) or technical specialist member in good standing in ALEA.
- Previously or currently employed by a law enforcement agency engaged in air support operations or previously or currently employed on a full-time basis as a unit manager, supervisor, pilot, aircrew member or maintenance technician.
- Engaged in airborne law enforcement activities in one of the capacities mentioned above for no less than three consecutive years.
- Not a current member of the ALEAC or ALEA Board of Directors.

How much will accreditation cost?

ALEAC is in continuing active dialogue with the insurance industry and ALEA affiliates in the hopes of minimizing the costs of accreditation. In spite of these efforts, there are administrative costs associated with the accreditation process that cannot be avoided. The Commission has established the following fees, taking into account the range of unit sizes and shapes, as well as the time that will be required to conduct assessments on each unit:

Unit Size / Description	Fee*
1 Site, 1 - 4 Aircraft	\$5,000
	0
1 Site, 5 - 8 Aircraft	\$5,500
	0
1 Site, 8 or More Aircraft	\$6,000
	0
2 or More Sites - Less than 8 Aircraft	\$7,500
	0
2 or More Sites - Less Than 15 Aircraft	\$8,500
	0
2 or More Sites - 15 Aircraft or More	\$9,500
	0

- ❑ Initial Application Fee – Ten percent of the applicable accreditation fee (non-refundable) must be submitted with the initial application.
- ❑ Accreditation Fee – Balance of applicable fee under each category below: 50 percent of total fee due when submitting the initial unit information form. Balance of total fee due after site visit completed.
- ❑ The fees above are all inclusive.
- ❑ There are no additional charges for assessor(s) fees, except those listed.
- ❑ Additional Accreditation Fees: An administrative fee equal to 10 percent of the original accreditation fee plus additional charges for assessor fees will be charged to the unit if a supplemental site visit is required for any action. These fees were established to cover the costs associated with assessor fees and administrative costs required to keep the ALEAC in operation to monitor the program.

A Joint Effort

A great deal of thanks goes out to a lot of people who have devoted considerable time and effort to this endeavor, most notably the ALEAC Board of Commissioners and the ALEA Board of Directors for their support and encouragement. And, many thanks to all of you who have offered valuable insights and input along the way. This has truly been a joint effort by the entire membership.

It is our hope that in providing a program of accreditation for airborne law enforcement we first make our industry safer while continuing to establish credibility and relevancy within law enforcement and the entire aviation industry. Thanks to all of you who risk your life every day to make our communities safer or save the life of a fellow officer just by being there when needed.

Current ALEAC Board of Commissioners

- ❑ Jim Di Giovanna – President; ALEA Education Program Manager; Captain (retired), Los Angeles County Sheriff's Department Aero Bureau Unit Commander
- ❑ Roy Swetnam – Vice President; Commander and Chief Pilot, Texas Department of Public Safety Aviation Section
- ❑ Don Roby – Secretary; Captain, Baltimore County (MD) Police Department, former Aviation Section commander
- ❑ Walt Billingsley – CFO; Chief Deputy, Jefferson County (TX) Sheriff's Department
- ❑ Regis R. Raffensberger – Board Member; Chief of Police, Colonel (retired), Frederick (MD) Police Department; Major (retired), Baltimore County Police Department; President Emeritus, ALEA
- ❑ Don Shinnamon – Board Member; Chief of Police, Port St. Lucie (FL) Police Department; Colonel (retired), Baltimore County Police Department; Chair, Aviation Committee, IACP

Captain Jim Di Giovanna retired in March 2006 after 17 years as commander of the L.A. County Sheriff's Department Aero Bureau. As unit commander, he was responsible for overseeing the operation and maintenance of the department's 15 rotary-wing and three fixed-wing aircraft. Jim is currently the Education Program Manager for ALEA and President of ALEAC. In 2004, he

*was honored by receiving the the MD Helicopters Law Enforcement Award
presented by HAI for his contributions to the advancement of the crime-
suppression concept of helicopters.*