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Date:	May 12, 2026
To:	San Diego Media
From:	Chula Vista Police Department
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Subject:	**Milestone Reached at the Chula Vista Police Department: Drone as First Responder Program Surpasses 25,000 Missions**

Message: FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

The Chula Vista Police Department's nationally recognized Drone as First Responder (DFR) program — the first of its kind in the nation — reached a major milestone on May 8, 2026, surpassing 25,000 missions in support of emergency calls for service.

Since launching in 2018, the Chula Vista Police Department has used remotely operated drones to respond to emergencies in real time — often arriving on scene before officers. When someone in Chula Vista has an emergency and calls 9-1-1, the officer in the drone operations center (known as the teleoperator) hears the call in real time and can send a drone to the scene, often before officers are even dispatched. Because drones are not impacted by traffic or many physical barriers, they can quickly begin streaming live video to responding officers.

The live video feed often changes the outcome of an incident. Officers can assess the safest response route, determine whether specialized resources are needed, and gather critical information before arriving on scene. In some cases, situations can even be resolved without dispatching patrol officers, allowing resources to remain available for other emergencies.

Since its inception, the Drone as First Responder (DFR) program has assisted on numerous types of calls, such as armed robberies, domestic violence incidents, stolen vehicles, missing person cases, fires, traffic collisions, thefts in progress, various disturbance calls, and calls involving reported weapons. Coupled with other technologies like Live911 — a web-based platform that streams emergency call audio to officers in real time — DFR has helped officers de-escalate dangerous situations by providing critical information before contact is made. In many cases, officers have been able to delay approaching dangerous individuals because of the drone's live feed, giving them time to use alternative methods rather than force to bring a peaceful resolution to the situation.

In 2019, the department received national attention after DFR helped de-escalate a reported "man with a gun" call. Witnesses reported a man waving what appeared to be a firearm. Within approximately 90 seconds, a drone arrived overhead and streamed live video to responding officers while the teleoperator provided real-

time updates. Prior to officers contacting the man, the teleoperator observed him using the “gun” to light a cigarette. The “gun” was actually a lighter — information that potentially saved the man’s life.

In October 2023, a man was rescued from a burning car on the side of the freeway just seconds before it became fully engulfed in flames. Although officers ultimately pulled the man to safety, the outcome would have likely been tragically different without the department’s use of DFR and Live911. Live911 allowed a Chula Vista Police sergeant to hear incoming emergency calls that otherwise would have been transferred to the California Highway Patrol. Based on the information he heard, the sergeant immediately requested a response from Chula Vista Police officers. Although callers initially provided an incorrect location, the drone teleoperator quickly identified the exact scene and guided officers directly to the vehicle, significantly reducing response time. Officers arrived within minutes and battled intense heat and flames to rescue the trapped driver moments before the vehicle became fully engulfed.

While many of DFR’s successes cannot be measured solely in numbers, the department tracks several key metrics that demonstrate the program’s impact. As of May 8, 2026, those numbers include:

- 4,138 – number of times DFR played a role in an arrest
- 4,629 – number of times patrol officers did NOT need to respond due to DFR
- 17,170 – number of times DFR was first on scene
- 96.98 seconds – average response time when DFR arrived before patrol officers

Transparency has remained a central focus throughout the evolution of the program. In addition to providing a public DFR activity dashboard on its website, the department also maintains a Drone Program Historical Flight Data portal. The portal gives community members access to a visual log of drone missions, including maps and brief explanations for each flight. The portal is updated after each mission, and community members are encouraged to review it if they have questions about drone activity in their neighborhood.

Historical Flight Data is just one of many features added to enhance both public safety and transparency throughout the program’s evolution. Other advancements have included emergency drone parachutes, longer flight times, and thermal imaging capabilities that have proven beneficial to both police and fire personnel. The department also emphasizes that DFR is not used for proactive patrol or general surveillance of the community. Policies have been established to prioritize community privacy while drones respond to and from incident locations, as well as govern how DFR video is stored and utilized.

The department’s DFR program reached 10,000 missions in March 2022, 20,000 missions in July 2024, and is now surpassing 25,000 missions less than two years later.

Nearly eight years after launching the nation’s first Drone as First Responder program, the Chula Vista Police Department continues to lead the way in integrating technology, transparency, and public safety. Below is a timeline highlighting major milestones and accomplishments since the inception of the Chula Vista Police Department’s Drone as First Responder program.

PROGRAM HISTORY:

- In November 2018, the Chula Vista Police Department was selected by the Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) to be a part of the FAA's Integration Pilot Project (IPP). The department was the only law enforcement member to participate. The IPP was a federal initiative designed to help integrate drones into the National Airspace System.

- In May 2019, Chula Vista Police became the first law enforcement agency in the country to be authorized by the FAA to fly Beyond Visual Line of Sight (BVLOS) in an urban area. Traditional FAA regulations require operators to maintain visual line of sight with drones during flight. The BVLOS authorization allowed the department to fly drones to emergency incidents up to three miles away from the launch site, beyond visual

line of sight. This allowed the department's drones to fly as first responders to many more emergencies across the community, often arriving long before officers on the ground.

- In August 2019, the FAA authorized the department to open a second launch site, expanding DFR coverage to approximately 33% of the city's geographic area — including zones responsible for nearly 70% of priority calls for service.

- In April 2020, the department became the first police agency in the nation to successfully test and deploy Live911, a platform that streams live 911 audio directly to officers and drone operators. The technology provides responders with immediate situational awareness, improving response times and helping officers make safer, more informed decisions before arriving on scene.

- In November 2020, the department received FAA approval allowing two drones to operate in close-proximity airspace during a single incident. The department was the first law enforcement agency in the country to receive this type of authorization, which enabled continuous aerial coverage to support first responders with real-time information.

- In March 2021, the department made history as the first in the United States to obtain FAA authorization to launch from anywhere in the city. By November of the same year, with the addition of two launch sites in the eastern portion of Chula Vista, first responders finally had the support of DFR city-wide. In addition, the Chula Vista Police Department became the first to obtain a two-to-one waiver from the FAA, which allowed the department to launch two drones from each site, providing seamless service to the community and first responders.

- In April 2021, the department partnered with Airdata and Motorola Solutions to launch the Drone Program Historical Flight Data portal, giving community members public access to flight paths and mission information following each DFR deployment.

- In February 2025, the department received FAA approval to operate drones in previously restricted airspace, expanding DFR capabilities in key areas throughout the city. This included the launch of DFR operations at the Chula Vista Amphitheater, adding an additional layer of safety for large-scale events and concertgoers.

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