

OFFICE OF OPERATIONS

OPERATIONS ORDER NO. 1

August 13, 2026

SUBJECT: DRONE AS FIRST RESPONDER UNIT – ESTABLISHED

BACKGROUND: On July 16, 2025, Operations Order No. 3, *Drone as First Responder Pilot Program*, was published for the Office of Operations (OO). Since its inception, this pilot program has met its objectives and demonstrated a positive impact for the geographic Areas and other Department entities. To enhance and expand its success, we will continue to leverage this technology in a manner that better serves the community and helps protect officers by establishing the Drone as First Responder (DFR) Unit.

PURPOSE: The purpose of this Order is to establish the DFR Unit within the OO. Additionally, this Order outlines the parameters by which the DFR Unit will operate and the use of small Unmanned Aircraft Systems (sUAS) by the OO. This Order does not revise, update, or supersede the Office of the Chief of Police's Special Order No. 4, *Small Unmanned Aerial System Program Deployment Guidelines and Procedures – Renamed and Revised*; and, *Small Unmanned Aerial System Deployment Log, Form 15.53.01 – Renamed and Revised*, dated June 24, 2025.

DEFINITIONS:

Airspace Deconfliction Officer (ADO): A member of the unit who coordinates the simultaneous operation of multiple sUASs in an Area.

Official Department Purposes: Official Department purposes include any law enforcement purpose (except those identified as prohibited uses), training, participation in ceremonial and community events, and development of educational and promotional videos.

Small Unmanned Aircraft System: A remotely operated small unmanned aircraft system without any human pilot, crew, or passengers on board. Additional frequent identifiers are Quadcopter, Model Aircraft, Unmanned Aerial Vehicle or UAV, Unmanned Aircraft System or UAS, and Unmanned Aircraft or UA.

Small Unmanned Aircraft System Deployment: Any sUAS flight operation performed for an official Department purpose that is within the scope of permissible uses.

Office of Operations Small Unmanned Aircraft System Operator/Remote Pilot in Command (RPIC): A specially trained Department employee assigned to the DFR Unit who shall possess a valid Remote Pilot Certificate (Part 107) obtained from the Federal Aviation Administration (FAA). The RPIC is responsible for the safe operation of a sUAS and is the person in charge of launching, maneuvering, and landing the drone.

Small Unmanned Aircraft System Training Flight: Any sUAS flight operation performed exclusively for the purpose of training, testing, or proficiency checks.

Tactical Communications Officer (TCO): A member of the DFR Unit whose role serves as the critical link between the DFR Unit and field personnel, translating live drone observations into clear, actionable information to support safe and effective decision-making.

Visual Observer (VO): A Visual Observer is a person who maintains visual contact with the sUAS during flight, scanning the surrounding airspace to identify potential obstacles or hazards, and communicates that information to the sUAS operator.

Government Code Section 7070: On September 30, 2021, California Governor Gavin Newsom signed Assembly Bill (AB) 481, establishing California Government Code Section 7070. The AB 481 requires law enforcement agencies to obtain approval from the relevant governing body (such as the City Council or Board of Police Commissioners) before taking certain actions related to the funding, acquisition, or use of military equipment. The term “military equipment” and the equipment classified as military equipment are defined in Government Code Section 7070.

PROCEDURES:

Certification and Training. Eligibility for the DFR Unit requires the following training and certifications to ensure sUAS operators can demonstrate their understanding of FAA regulations, operating requirements, and proficiency for safely flying sUAS for the Department:

- Possess a valid Remote Pilot Certificate (Part 107) from the FAA prior to attending any Department sUAS training; and,
- Complete the OO DFR training and any subsequent required training updates.

Objectives of Drone as First Responder. The operations of the DFR Unit should be conducted with the following objectives to enhance public safety:

- Reduce response times to calls for service;
- Document incidents for criminal prosecution;
- Optimize Department resources;
- Aim to enhance officer safety; and,
- Help ground personnel assess situations more effectively.

- I. **PERMISSIBLE USES.** Only authorized sUAS operators who have completed the required training shall be permitted to operate the sUAS. Only Department-approved sUAS and equipment shall be used to conduct sUAS deployments. An sUAS operator may deploy a sUAS only for official Department purposes and in a manner that respects the reasonable expectation of privacy, pursuant to all applicable laws and regulations.

II. PROHIBITED USES. Department sUAS shall not:

- Be deployed or used in violation of the City of Los Angeles municipal laws, California State laws, the United States Constitution, any FAA regulations, or published flight restrictions (absent waiver);
- Be used to unlawfully harass, intimidate, or discriminate against any individual or group;
- Be used to target a person based solely on actual or perceived characteristics, such as, race, color, religion or creed, age, national origin, ethnicity, immigration status, gender (including gender identity or expression), sexual orientation, disability, or military status;
- Be used to record or photograph First Amendment assemblies for the purpose of identifying participants who are not engaged in unlawful conduct;
- Be equipped with any weapon system or facial recognition software;
- Be used as a weapon;
- Be deployed when weather conditions or other hazards prevent the safe operation of the aircraft or in a manner exceeding the manufacturer's recommendations;
- Be used for personal business of any kind; and,
- Be used in a manner that is contrary to any additional restrictions imposed by the sUAS Program Manager or the OO sUAS Coordinator.

III. OFFICE OF OPERATIONS DRONE AS FIRST RESPONDER UNIT RESPONSIBILITIES. The DFR Unit is supervised by the OO sUAS Coordinator. All unit members are responsible for the safe operation of the sUAS as used for any of the permissible uses.

Note: The DFR Unit members shall not operate a personal sUAS while on duty.

IV. DRONE AS FIRST RESPONDER UNIT OFFICER'S RESPONSIBILITIES. All members within the DFR Unit will have the capacity to act as RPICs, TCOs, ADOs, and VOs. The officers shall receive training on the operation and basic maintenance of the sUAS. The responsibilities of officers assigned to the DFR Unit include:

- Retaining knowledge of sUAS system capabilities;
- Adhering to the maintenance of all equipment as outlined by the manufacturer;
- Making notifications to applicable watch commanders, Air Support Division, and Communications Division, as well as notifying any additional Department or outside entities of flight operations daily;
- Distributing live-streaming access to the appropriate personnel via their Department email;
- Analyzing daily weather forecasts to ensure safe flights; and,
- Providing training to Department personnel on unit functions, capabilities, and operations.

An RPIC's responsibilities include:

- Safely launching, operating, and landing the sUAS;
- Conducting test flights;
- Ensuring that manned aircraft always take priority;
- Continuously monitoring sUAS performance;
- Maintaining awareness of restricted airspace;
- Monitoring the Automatic Dependent Surveillance-Broadcast of manned aircraft, commonly referred to as ADS-B;
- Completing any post-flight associated administrative tasks;
- Tagging and categorizing each individual video on *Evidence.com*;
- Providing pertinent recorded sUAS footage to other Department personnel, as needed;
- Ensuring the sUAS does not endanger the life or property of another; and,
- Adhering to strict FAA regulations and addressing privacy concerns.

Note: Any DFR Unit member acting as the RPIC has the final decision on whether or not the sUAS will be deployed.

A TCO's responsibilities include:

- Relaying real-time aerial intelligence to officers on the ground, ensuring accurate, timely situational awareness during incidents;
- Managing radio discipline to ensure clear and effective communication during operations;
- Monitoring radio traffic and maintaining awareness of incident developments;
- Assisting in the coordination of resources;
- Prioritizing and communicating critical information to field personnel in a clear and concise manner; and,
- Maintaining tactical communication with patrol units, airships, and involved personnel.

An ADO's responsibilities include:

- Monitoring operational airspace for potential conflicts and hazards;
- Providing real-time airspace awareness and deconfliction guidance to DFR personnel;
- Coordinating air traffic when multiple sUAS are in operation in the same Area; and,
- Remaining available to assist other DFR personnel and provide coverage when operationally necessary.

A VO's responsibilities include:

Note: Pursuant to the Department's FAA Certificates of Waiver, daily operations adhere to Beyond Visual Line of Sight or "BVLOS" deployments and are conducted without a VO. The need for a VO will be assessed based on operational requirements to enable higher flight altitudes while ensuring compliance with FAA policies.

- Maintaining the visual line of sight with the sUAS;
- Maintaining an open line of communication with the RPIC;
- Observe, identify, and communicate any other air traffic and hazards in the surroundings of the sUAS;
- Maintaining reasonable knowledge of the sUAS's location, altitude, and direction of flight;
- Retaining the sUAS remote and ensuring it is operational and easily accessible for immediate control; and,
- Performing equipment testing, troubleshooting, and maintenance.

V. DRONE AS FIRST RESPONDER UNIT SUPERVISOR'S RESPONSIBILITIES.

The responsibilities of supervisors assigned to the DFR Unit include:

- Ensuring that unit personnel comply with their responsibilities;
- Ensuring that all flights adhere to FAA regulations and state law;
- Liaising with nearby airports, towers, and the FAA to establish and maintain open lines of communication;
- Managing and overseeing the maintenance of unit equipment;
- Coordinating with patrol and other Department entities;
- Ensuring that information and sUAS footage requests are fulfilled;
- Advising Area supervision of a perceived use of force incident captured on the sUAS;
- Maintaining documentation of all flight operations/flight logs, training records, and certifications;
- Maintaining adherence to the AB 481 complaint policy; and,
- Ensuring the effective management and coordination of daily DFR Unit operations and personnel activities.

VI. WATCH COMMANDER RESPONSIBILITIES. It is the watch commander's responsibility to document that the DFR Unit is operational in their Area that day, along with any relevant information in their *Watch Commander's Daily Report*, Form 15.80.00.

VII. AREA COMMANDING OFFICER RESPONSIBILITIES. The Area Commanding Officer (CO) should maintain general awareness of the DFR Unit and provide support as needed. Additionally, COs should ensure access to Area resources to facilitate DFR Unit operations.

VIII. BUREAU COMMANDING OFFICER RESPONSIBILITIES. The bureau CO should maintain general awareness of the DFR Unit and ensure that Area COs support and provide access to Area resources to facilitate its operations.

IX. OFFICE OF OPERATIONS SMALL UNMANNED AIRCRAFT SYSTEM COORDINATOR'S RESPONSIBILITIES. The Assistant to the Director, OO, will designate the OO sUAS Coordinator who will maintain oversight of the DFR Unit. The sUAS Coordinator shall possess a Remote Pilot Certificate (Part 107). The OO sUAS Coordinator will be responsible for the following:

- Monitoring the progress of the DFR Unit;
- Overseeing and ensuring compliance with Department policy, FAA regulations, federal regulations, applicable laws, notifications, training, mandated tracking of sUAS activity, and remaining apprised of changes in sUAS industry best practices;
- Ensuring the personnel assigned to the DFR Unit adhere to the policies outlined in this Order;
- Verifying all sUAS operators' training and Remote Pilot Certificates (Part 107) are captured and retained by the Department;
- Retaining all sUAS deployment documentation and providing reports, as requested on sUAS deployments;
- Providing the sUAS Program Manager with the information and documentation for annual reporting to Audit Division, per Government Code 7070 et. seq.; and,
- Periodically inspect the program and complete necessary reports or updates to the Director of OO, sUAS Program Manager, or the Chief of Police.

Note: Further restrictions may be placed on the DFR Unit as appropriate for the mission by the OO sUAS Coordinator. The sUAS Program Manager may also place further restrictions on the DFR Unit as a result of a safety or risk management concern.

X. PROTECTION OF PRIVACY. The Department shall only collect, use, and disseminate information obtained from a sUAS for a permissible use. Operators must follow FAA altitude regulations and are prohibited from intentionally recording or transmitting images of any location from an elevation or proximity in which individuals would have a reasonable expectation of privacy (absent a warrant, exigent circumstances, or consent of the property owner). Operators shall take reasonable precautions to avoid inadvertently recording or transmitting images of areas where there is a reasonable expectation of privacy.

XI. DOCUMENTATION AND INSPECTION PROCEDURES. All sUAS deployments shall be documented in the format outlined in Office of the Chief of Police's Special Order No. 4, *Small Unmanned Aerial System Program Deployment Guidelines and Procedures – Renamed and Revised*; and, *Small Unmanned Aerial System Deployment Log, Form 15.53.01 – Renamed and Revised*, dated June 24, 2025.

- XII. RECORDING OF INCIDENTS.** Recording of each incident shall begin at or near the scene of the incident and continue until the sUAS either leaves the location or the investigative or enforcement activity involving a member of the public has ended.
- XIII. PROCEDURE FOR REVIEWING SMALL UNMANNED AIRCRAFT SYSTEM RECORDINGS IN CATEGORICAL USE OF FORCE INCIDENTS.** If an officer is involved in a Categorical Use of Force, the officer shall not review the sUAS recording prior to being interviewed by Force Investigation Division.
- XIV. DIGITAL RECORDINGS.** Officers shall not copy, edit, alter, erase, or otherwise modify in any manner sUAS recordings except as authorized by law or Department policy.

For each incident recorded on a sUAS, the RPIC shall identify the event type and other information that best describes the content of the video (i.e., arrest, traffic stop, report).

Members of the DFR Unit should advise involved personnel of an incident captured on the sUAS, in order to document the footage under the proper heading on all administrative and investigative reports (e.g., "The suspect's actions were recorded via sUAS.")

If any portion of an incident resulting in an arrest is captured by a sUAS, DFR Unit members should advise involved personnel to identify the existence of sUAS recordings on all necessary forms, including the *City Attorney's Disclosure Statement*, Form 05.02.09.

All images, as well as video recordings captured by sUAS deployment, shall comply with Department Manual Sections 3/579.15, *Body-Worn Video Procedures*, and 3/405, *Confidential Nature of Department Records, Reports, and Information*.

- XV. PUBLIC TRANSPARENCY PLATFORM.** The Department retains a DFR Public Transparency Platform for the citizens of Los Angeles. This platform is designed to display flight paths, the types of calls to which the sUAS has responded, and other relevant data related to sUAS operations.
- XVI. DATA RETENTION.** All video shall be stored in *Evidence.com*.
- XVII. PERSONNEL COMPLAINTS.** Conduct of Department personnel observed during the review of a sUAS recording in connection with an administrative investigation should focus on the object of the review. If minor misconduct is discovered during an investigation, the progressive discipline model shall be followed prior to framing an allegation for the minor misconduct discovered during the review. The supervisor discovering the minor misconduct is responsible for notifying the employee's commanding officer of the minor misconduct, who should evaluate the facts and circumstances surrounding the incident. The employee's commanding officer must use

sound judgment to determine the appropriate course of action while following the progressive discipline model.

All complaints and concerns regarding sUAS use will be documented and responded to in a timely manner, in compliance with Department policy and Government Code Section 7070 et. seq.

XVIII. COLLISION PROCEDURES. If a sUAS collision occurs during the operation of a sUAS, the DFR Unit shall:

- Request a patrol unit to respond to the location of occurrence to assess the incident and request additional resources as needed;
- Request that the patrol unit secure the site until a supervisor arrives at scene; and,
- Notify a DFR Unit supervisor. If the DFR Unit supervisor is not immediately available to respond, request a supervisor from the geographic Area of occurrence.

The DFR Unit supervisor will make notifications to the OO sUAS Coordinator, sUAS Program Manager, FAA, and National Transportation Safety Board as applicable.

AUDIT RESPONSIBILITY. The CO, Audit Division, shall review this directive and determine whether an audit or inspection shall be conducted in accordance with Department Manual Section 0/08.30.



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