

# CalSTAR, ski workers prep for winter transports



CalSTAR on Oct. 21 explains to Heavenly employees how to work around a helicopter. Photo/Kathryn Reed

**By Kathryn Reed**

A helicopter ride isn't anyone's idea of a good way to end the ski day. But when minutes matter an air ambulance can be the difference between life and death.

It's a group effort to ensure injured skiers and riders get to a hospital as quickly as possible.

"Our goal is skids down to skids up of 10 minutes or less," CalSTAR flight nurse Beth Frisby said.

Kip McCarthy, Kirkwood Mountain Resort's health and safety manager, told *Lake Tahoe News* an air ambulance is an integral part for that resort as well at Heavenly Mountain Resort.

“What would have been over an hour is now 20 minutes,” McCarthy said of driving vs. air time to get a patient to a hospital.

Every year CalSTAR trains with employees of the local mountains so they are ready when the helicopter arrives. On Friday it was a group from Heavenly learning about the loading procedures and the necessary respect to have for the H235, P3 Airbus.

“We need to get this right 100 percent of the time,” flight nurse Ted Langevin told the group huddled around the landing zone at the California Lodge parking lot. “If you are not sure what to do, stop.”

Because accidents happen at all times of the day, even to workers, it’s not just the patrollers who train with CalSTAR.



Sky Meadows is the busiest on-mountain landing zone for

CalSTAR at Heavenly. Photo/Kathryn Reed

The blades on the helicopter are not visible at night and the back of the bird is a dangerous place to be. Ironically, though, the back is where patients are loaded.

With this being the first year for the new helicopter, it will mean some training for the CalSTAR crew, too. The back end is lower to ground, which will make a difference in snowy conditions.

Bear paws are put on the skids in the winter for traction in the snow.

In a mock situation, with blades not rotating and no snow on the ground, the Heavenly gang got to see what it would be like to carry a backboard (sans patient) to the rear of the helicopter and then lift the patient in.

Those on the ground are responsible for telling the flight crew – which consists of a pilot and two nurses – the wind and landing conditions. If they don't know the direction of the wind, saying they are facing a certain way and then if the wind is to their front or back, or if it's swirling will help the pilot.

Dusty snow on the ground will kick up and blind the pilot. Stomping the snow to make it more solid might be needed. Putting a sack with chains in it (so it doesn't blow away) can be a good marker for where the nose of the helicopter should be.

Don't be afraid to call for helicopter was repeated multiple times on Oct. 21.

"If you are thinking about it more than one time, call the helicopter," Frisby told the workers. "We'd rather be called and there's no patient than to be called too late."



It doesn't cost anyone anything if it turns out the person should be transported via regular ambulance.

Langevin added, "Weather will always be an issue, but don't let that be a determining factor for you."



Patients are loaded from the back into the CalSTAR helicopter. Photo/Kathryn Reed

Wind can be an issue, not so much for the helicopter, but for the people inside of it. Sudden gusts are the worst for the nurses.

"We can fly in a lot of wind. But if we can't help the patient, it does us no good," pilot Mark Davis told *Lake Tahoe News*.

It's the CalSTAR team that decides where the patient will go

and the type of care needed. Most ski patrollers have an extremely limited medical background.

Trauma and stroke patients go to Renown Medical Center in Reno, burn patients to UC Davis in Sacramento, cardiac cases to Carson-Tahoe in Carson City and fractures to Barton Memorial Hospital in South Lake.

CalSTAR, which has eight nurses, four pilots and a base mechanic, is like a flying hospital.

It's not just injured skiers CalSTAR is lifting from area resorts. Babies have been delivered and sometimes the person has already died.

Of the 72 ski resort calls CalSTAR received in 2015-16, 35 percent were from Heavenly. Crews also went to Kirkwood, Sierra, Squaw Valley and Bear Valley. The No. 1 reason is for falls – which includes terrain park injuries, then hitting a fixed object like a tree, third is skier vs. rider (or some combination), and fourth is cardiac.

Hard conditions and busy times, like holidays, are when the call volume goes up.

Most resorts have designated landing zones for CalSTAR, though it is possible to land at other locations. Besides the Cal Lodge at Heavenly, Sky Meadows is the next busiest landing location. The Galaxy location near East Peak, Stagecoach and Boulder lodges are also landing sites.