

Radio trouble keeps Calstar from flying in Tahoe



Airbus is working to solve the radio problem with Calstar in Tahoe. Photo Copyright 2017 Carolyn E. Wright

By Kathryn Reed

Calstar's helicopter at Lake Tahoe Airport has been grounded for more than two weeks and there is no date on the horizon when it will be flying again.

"We are unable to efficiently and effectively communicate in that region because of the radios. We won't fly without good communications," Anna Blair, vice president of business strategy for Calstar, told *Lake Tahoe News*. "It is very specific to the radio frequency that is utilized in your community."

No other base is affected by this radio issue.

Air Medical Group, which is now the parent company of Calstar, has 240 air ambulance in 32 states. Calstar has bases in Auburn, Ukiah, Gilroy, Concord, Salinas and Santa Maria. It has been in South Lake Tahoe since October 2001.

Since the merger last year Calstar now uses an Airbus H135/P3. Airbus is working on a solution to the radio problem.

"They are literally working every single day until we are back in service. Typically, they are a very responsive vendor," Blair said.

It was not an immediate issue, but something that developed over time.

In the interim Care Flight has been picking up the slack. It operates out of the Truckee and Minden airports and is based in Reno.

"It's not uncommon to rely on each other for service when things are busy. We haven't experienced anything where we've left the region uncovered," J.W. Hodge, COO for Care Flight, told *Lake Tahoe News*.

His people and Calstar are in regular communication. Care Flight has not needed to adjust its staffing or move resources to accommodate the increase in calls with Calstar's absence.

The air ambulances cover for each other during routine maintenance of the aircraft and when one is on a call. So in many ways this is no different for the crews.

Plus, the number of calls tends to decrease when school is back in session and even more so after Labor Day weekend.

Not being able to fly hasn't meant the local Calstar employees are out out of work.

“For the staff, there is still a lot of items to do – training, collateral duties. We do have other Calstar bases and they do move around,” Blair said.

For South Lake Tahoe Fire Department, Calstar’s situation has not caused any problems to date.

“Generally we give the helicopter a heads up before we think we need them. When we’ve needed the helicopter the other company has been here,” Fire Chief Jeff Meston told *Lake Tahoe News*.

One thing to note is that when Calstar was bought last year the reciprocal membership agreement with Care Flight went away. This means it’s a good idea to have both memberships because one never knows which helicopter will arrive on scene. The membership is like an additional insurance policy.