

PENNSYLVANIA STATE POLICE

SENATE INTERGOVERNMENTAL
OPERATIONS COMMITTEE

COMMONWEALTH AIRCRAFT OPERATIONS

HEARING

JUNE 23, 2025



Good afternoon, Chairman Coleman and Chair Tartaglione and members of the Senate Intergovernmental Operations Committee. I am Lieutenant Colonel George Bivens, Deputy Commissioner of Operations of the Pennsylvania State Police (PSP).

I appreciate the opportunity to offer remarks on behalf of the PSP Aviation Section. The Aviation Section is a unit of the Bureau of Emergency and Special Operations (BESO) specializing in air support for law enforcement operations.

The PSP Aviation Section was created by legislative decree in the fall of 1968. In 1969, two Bell Model 47 Helicopters were purchased, and six pilots were assigned to the Section.

Currently, there are five Aviation Patrol Units (APUs) across Pennsylvania. All of the APUs (1, 2, 3, 5, and 6) are

staffed with helicopter pilots, and APU-3 is staffed with fixed-wing aircraft pilots. APU-3 also staffs the PSP's Aviation Maintenance Unit. PSP helicopters and airplanes fly routine patrol in the entire coverage area. Hangars are strategically located to ensure efficient response times anywhere in a patrol zone. No aircraft is restricted to a particular area. Crews are ready to assist any municipal, state, or federal law enforcement agency anywhere in the Commonwealth, should the need arise.

The Aviation Section has a total of 23 helicopter pilot positions and five fixed-wing pilot positions. There is an Aviation Section Commander and a Section Safety/Training Officer located at BESO Headquarters in Hershey. The Aviation Maintenance Unit consists of five positions, a civilian Maintenance Manager position, two civilian

helicopter mechanic positions, and two aircraft mechanic positions.

The PSP aircraft fleet consists of six Bell 407GX helicopters and two fixed-wing aircraft. Three of the helicopters are 2013 model year and three are 2014. The aircraft hours range from 2,800 to 4,065 hours. The fixed-wing aircraft are a 2015 Pilatus PC-12 and a 2019 Cessna Caravan 208B. The Pilatus has 1,865 hours, and the Caravan has 799 hours.

The Aviation Section provides aerial support to all Commonwealth law enforcement agencies. They also assist in other non-emergency situations, including major civic and sporting events. The PSP conducts all flights under Federal Aviation Regulations (FAR) Part 91, with the exception of Night Vision Goggles (NVG) flights and certain

tactical missions (i.e. Use of helicopter in Special Emergency Response Team (SERT) Operations).

Helicopter and airplane pilots log thousands of hours of flight time every year on missions including:

- conducting searches and rescues
- assisting in vehicle pursuits
- conducting criminal surveillances
- participating in marijuana eradication efforts
- crime and traffic incident scene photography
- transports
- providing an aerial platform for incident command and control
- attending events which promoted law enforcement efforts

The helicopters are also used to conduct routine daily patrol missions and other requests for service. In 2024, the

highlights consisted of 130 surveillance missions, 279 search missions, 100 patrol flights, and 204 training flights, conducted 1,671 missions, including 334 searches, 37 marijuana eradication, 61 personnel transports, 14 photography, and 99 public relations events.

In June 2024, the PSP purchased a new King Air 360 from Textron Aviation, Inc., which is expected to be delivered during the second quarter of 2026.

On November 27, 2024, the PSP's Pilatus PC-12NG was damaged by a vendor during its annual maintenance and inspection. The Pilatus is used for miscellaneous transport missions, prisoner extraditions, and multiple aspects of criminal and special investigations, and is an integral asset to the operational needs of the PSP. The damage to the Pilatus's wing spar rendered the aircraft completely inoperable. Due to the extent of the damage, it had to be

disassembled and transported to a Pilatus-authorized structural repair facility in Boise, Idaho. The repairs are estimated to require approximately 2,000 labor-hours to complete, with work expected to conclude in late 2025, and all related costs are to be covered by the vendor's insurance carrier. Subsequently, the PSP was unable to support the vast number of requests for missions typically conducted with the Pilatus.

Additionally, the Aviation Section had recently experienced a significant increase in nationwide transport requests to assist investigators in resolving cold case murders due to new DNA processing technology. These required transport requests often allow minimal time for planning.

The Aviation Section began working on an emergency procurement to purchase a used 2022 King Air 360 in light

of operational needs. Several King Air aircraft were considered; however, FL-1305 was the only King Air 360 on the market in North America at the time that was similarly equipped as the previously purchased new King Air 360.

The used 2022 King Air, a twin-engine aircraft provides PSP with the capability of operating with an extended range of flights to PSP members, federal agencies operating in PA, other Commonwealth agencies, and local law enforcement. The King Air was sought to enhance PSP transport capabilities. Those increased capabilities will allow transport for essential or key personnel to critical or high-risk incidents. PSP experienced a significant rise in prisoner extradition requests to retrieve violent criminal offenders that absconded from the Commonwealth to avoid apprehension so that they may face criminal prosecution. Often, the prisoner extradition requests require long out of

state flights over unfamiliar mountainous terrain and a single engine aircraft presents challenges and safety concerns to aircrew and the aircraft. A twin-engine aircraft tremendously increases the safety of all crew members and passengers, resulting in a much safer flight and operation. The increased power and capacity of the King Air 360 will also allow members to conduct prisoner extradition missions in less time, decreasing the number of overnight flights required. This decrease in overnight prisoner extradition missions would provide a cost savings in overnight accommodations and subsistence for the multiple members required during each prisoner extradition mission.

The increased safety of a twin-engine aircraft compared to the current Department single engine fleet cannot be overstated. Should an engine failure occur during flight with a current single engine aircraft, the outcome

would be devastating with a likely loss of crew/passenger lives and potentially innocent public on the ground, especially in a highly populated area. The twin-engine King Air can maintain flight if it has a single engine failure. Prior to this purchase, the PSP had no access to aircraft with these features and would not until delivery of the new King Air in 2026.

As previously mentioned, the PSP operates under FAR Part 91, which governs private, corporate, and other non-commercial aviation, and a flight manifest is not required by regulation. However, in February 2025, PSP voluntarily began logging and providing flight information monthly, to include state officials as passengers in accordance with Title 74 (Authority of Department and Logging of Certain Aircraft Flights), Section 1, 5302, Aircraft for Official Use.

In addition to FAR Part 91, the PSP applies its own Aviation Standard Operating Procedures (SOP). All enlisted PSP pilots are obligated to comply with the SOP while operating Department aircraft.

All enlisted pilots within the PSP adhere to Department Regulations (FR 3-5), which requires them to be physically and mentally fit to serve and protect the public. In accordance with the Drug-Free Workplace Act of 1988, the Department prohibits the use or possession on or off duty of a controlled substance by a member with the following exceptions:

A. Possession is required during the member's official duties.

B. The controlled substance has been legally prescribed for a medical condition for the member.

All enlisted members of PSP, including pilots, are subject to random drug testing procedures which are administered by a third-party vendor.

All pilots using a prescribed medication are required to report it via correspondence to the Aviation Safety and Training Officer. Prior to any flight as a Pilot in Command or required crew member, all prescriptions must be approved by a Federal Aviation Administration Aviation Medical Examiner. In addition, pilots are also guided by PSP Field Regulation (FR 1-1, Section 1.25, Use of Drugs) to report use of prescription medications.

Fixed-Wing training for PSP pilots is conducted by Flight Safety International. The fixed-wing training is for the King Air 360, Pilatus PC-12, and Cessna Caravan 208C, for both initial and recurrent.

Rotor-Wing training for PSP pilots is provided by Bell Training Academy or Helicopter Institute and encompasses ground and flight initial/recurrent/Night Vision Goggle (NVG) training.

PSP pilots are required to conduct an annual flight review. At a minimum, the annual flight review consists of the following:

- Night flight, both aided (helicopter pilots) and unaided.
- Ground portion may include oral and/or written test.
- Mission equipment proficiency
- Inadvertent Instrument Meteorological Conditions (IMC) procedures with an instrument approach (helicopter pilots)

Thank you for the opportunity to provide you with PSP's experience and perspective on this topic. I will be pleased to answer any questions you may have.