What GAO Found

The air ambulance industry has increased in size, and concerns about its safety have grown in recent years. Available data suggest that the industry grew, most notably in the number of stand alone (independent or community-based) as opposed to hospital-based operators, and competition increased among operators, from 2003 through 2008. During this period, the number of air ambulance accidents remained at historical levels, fluctuating between 11 and 15 accidents per year, and in 2008, the number of fatal accidents peaked at 9. This accident record is cause for concern. However, a lack of reliable data on flight hours precludes calculation of the industry accident rate—a critical piece of information in determining whether the increased number of accidents reflects industry growth or a declining safety record.

The air ambulance industry and FAA have acted to address accident trends and causes. For example, FAA enhanced its oversight to reflect the varying sizes of operators, provided technical resources to the industry, launched an accident mitigation program, and revised the minimum standards for weather and safe cruising altitudes that apply to air ambulance operations.

Despite the actions to improve air ambulance safety, 2008 was the deadliest year on record for the industry. Through its work on aviation safety, including air ambulance safety; review of the published literature; and interviews with government and industry officials, GAO has identified several potential strategies for improving air ambulance safety, including the following:

- Obtain complete and accurate data on air ambulance operations.
- Increase the use of safety technologies.
- Sustain recent efforts to improve air ambulance safety.
- Fully address NTSB’s recommendations.
- Adopt safety management systems within the air ambulance industry.
- Clarify the role of states in overseeing air medical services.
- Determine the appropriate use of air ambulance services.

Factors that may contribute to the increasing number of accidents include:

- Varying levels of experience and training among the air ambulance industry’s pilots, flight nurses, and paramedics.
- The use of helicopters, which are more difficult to land and maneuver than fixed-wing aircraft.
- A lack of requirements for ongoing medical readiness oversight.
- A lack of regulations requiring operators to have maintenance management plans.
- A lack of aviation authorities requiring that air ambulance pilots be certified in直升机 operations.

To view the full product, including the scope and methodology, click on GAO-09-627T. For more information, contact Gerald L. Dillingham at (202) 512-2834 or dillinghamg@gao.gov.