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L.A. County sheriff's aircraft used for personal reasons, audit finds

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An audit released Thursday found that Los Angeles County Sheriff's Department managers improperly used department aircraft, including a helicopter dispatched to give a commander's daughter a ride to a retirement party.

In another instance, sheriff's officials used a department airplane to fly to Connecticut, costing the county more than \$35,000 for a trip that would have been significantly cheaper and likely faster on a commercial flight.

The county audit was prompted earlier this year by a Los Angeles Times report about allegations that officials were abusing aircraft privileges, purposely delaying emergency calls to make the case for more overtime pay, and possibly manipulating time sheets. The Times reporting was based on internal sheriff's memos and a deputy's lawsuit that implicated officials.

While the audit found that aircraft were improperly used, it did not find evidence to support the most troubling claims: that calls for emergency service were ignored or that time sheets were manipulated. The auditor-controller's office found those allegations were not supported by sheriff's records.

Department spokesman Steve Whitmore called the audit an "exoneration" of the department's air support division, saying the most serious allegations were unsubstantiated.

“They’re always going to find little things that are questionable,” he said. “The sheriff does not accept any questionable uses of county items and is prepared to correct anything that needs correcting.”

The audit pointed to three problematic trips. Along with the \$35,000 flight to Connecticut to research new helicopters, a department plane was flown to Tucson, Ariz., in 2010 to pick up three sheriff's officials for a conference. The trip was recorded as a training flight, a description that “appears notably convenient,” the audit found.

The third flight, also in 2010, involved the daughter of a commander being picked up in Calabasas by a sheriff's helicopter, and given a ride to the commander's retirement party in East Los Angeles. At the time, the helicopter was supposed to be assigned to patrol duty.

“The daughter had allegedly been delayed by highway traffic,” according to the audit.

At a county Board of Supervisors meeting in March after the allegations were made public, the unit's captain said that one of the accusers had himself flown two relatives on a department helicopter a few years back, picking them up from northern L.A. County and flying them to LAX.

Whitmore said the Sheriff's Department has not yet decided whether to discipline anyone involved in the questionable flights mentioned in the audit. He said he did not have any of their names, and that Sheriff Lee Baca had not yet decided whether to release those names.

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-- Robert Faturechi

Photo: A sheriff's helicopter is shown taking off. Credit: Los Angeles Times

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