

## INTRADEPARTMENTAL CORRESPONDENCE

April 20, 2026  
1.18

**TO:** The Honorable Board of Police Commissioners

**FROM:** Chief of Police

**SUBJECT:** 2025 SMALL UNMANNED AIRCRAFT SYSTEMS (sUAS) ANNUAL REPORT

### RECOMMENDED ACTION

It is recommended that the Board of Police Commissioners REVIEW and APPROVE the attached 2025 Small Unmanned Aircraft Systems (sUAS) Annual Report.

### DISCUSSION

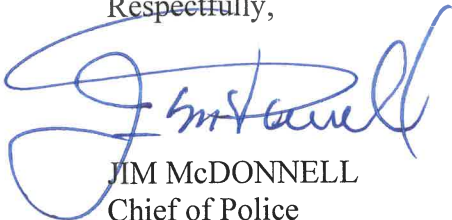
To promote transparency in the Department's deployment of small Unmanned Aircraft Systems (sUAS) and to provide the Board of Police Commissioners with meaningful performance metrics, the Department has prepared the attached 2025 Annual Report on sUAS.

This report details the number of deployments conducted by both the Drone as First Responder (DFR) program and tactical sUAS units, including those operated by the Special Weapons and Tactics (SWAT) Platoon. It also outlines the policy framework governing sUAS use and assesses the Department's compliance with those requirements.

In addition, the report highlights notable deployments, evaluates the operational benefits realized by the Department, and reviews collisions that occurred in 2025. It concludes with recommended policy updates designed to improve operational efficiency while maintaining accountability

For any questions or clarification, please contact the Office of Special Operations, at (213) 486-8440.

Respectfully,

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read "Jim McDonnell", is written over the typed name and title.

JIM McDONNELL  
Chief of Police

Attachment

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**Purpose.** On June 24, 2025, the Board of Police Commissioners enacted Special Order No. 4, significantly expanding the Department’s authority to deploy Small Unmanned Aircraft Systems (sUAS). In accordance with the requirements set forth in Special Order No. 4, this annual report provides a comprehensive overview of the Department’s sUAS operations, including deployment metrics, program development, and operational impacts. To be consistent with its colloquial name, sUAS will also be referred to throughout this report as “drones.”

**Executive Summary.** In 2025, Department personnel conducted a total of 3,030 sUAS flights in support of public safety operations. The majority of these deployments were conducted under the Department’s Drone as a First Responder (DFR) program, reflecting its central role in modernizing field operations. Of these, 83 flights were conducted using the program’s initial piloted hardware platform, while 2,467 flights utilized the fully deployed, final hardware solution. Approximately 500 DFR flights were dedicated to training, underscoring the Department’s ongoing investment in operator proficiency and program sustainability.

In addition, tactical sUAS assets were deployed 480 times in support of 41 field operations, providing critical aerial capabilities during high-risk and complex incidents.

Overall, the integration of sUAS technology has materially enhanced the Department’s operational effectiveness. Drones have improved response times to critical incidents, expanded situational awareness for personnel on the ground, reduced information gaps during rapidly evolving events, and supported a more informed and deliberate de-escalation posture. Collectively, these capabilities have strengthened the Department’s ability to deliver safe, efficient, and effective public safety services.

**Background.** Prior to the implementation of Special Order No. 4, the Department’s use of sUAS was narrowly constrained by both policy and operational limitations. Authorization to deploy drones was restricted to specialized units, including the Metropolitan Division’s Special Weapons and Tactics (SWAT) Platoon, the Emergency Services Division’s Bomb Squad and Hazardous Materials Section, and the Traffic Coordination Division’s Multi-Disciplinary Collision Investigation Team (MCIT). Deployment criteria were similarly restrictive, limiting use to the most critical tactical incidents and precluding broader operational applications.

Following the adoption of Special Order No. 4, the Office of Operations initiated an innovative Drone as a First Responder (DFR) pilot program designed to expand and modernize the Department’s use of sUAS. Under this program, trained personnel proactively deploy drones to service calls where aerial perspective can provide immediate operational value. Visual observers deliver real-time intelligence to responding units, including suspect and evidence location, hazard identification, and enhanced tactical awareness.

The DFR platform incorporates advanced hardware capable of seamlessly transitioning between traditional radio-frequency control and cellular network connectivity. This capability enables the

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real-time transmission of live video feeds to field personnel and incident command posts, significantly improving coordination, decision-making, and overall incident management.

**Findings.** The Department's use of sUAS in 2025 directly advanced its core mission by enhancing operational effectiveness while promoting safer outcomes for both personnel and the community. The integration of this technology enabled officers to resolve incidents with greater precision, improved situational awareness, and reduced exposure to risk.

Special Order No. 4 also strengthened internal governance of the Department's sUAS Program through the establishment of the sUAS Program Manager position, selected by the Director, Office of Special Operations. Under the revised policy, the Program Manager maintains Department-wide oversight of all sUAS operations, conducts inspections to ensure compliance with established procedures, and is authorized to impose restrictions on any sUAS cadre to address safety, operational, or risk management concerns.

Each of the following annual reporting topics are discussed below:

*Policy Compliance*

In accordance with Department policy, all sUAS operators are required to hold a valid Remote Pilot Certificate (Part 107) issued by the Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) and must complete Department-approved training, including any required recurrent training, prior to being authorized to operate sUAS equipment. Additionally, all operations must be conducted exclusively using Department-owned equipment.

Department policy further establishes clear prohibitions governing the use of sUAS. Specifically, sUAS shall not:

- Be deployed or used in violation of the City of Los Angeles municipal laws, California State laws, the United States Constitution, any FAA regulations, or published flight restrictions (absent waiver);
- Be used to unlawfully harass, intimidate, or discriminate against any individual or group;
- Be used to target a person based solely on actual or perceived characteristics, such as, race, color, religion or creed, age, national origin, ethnicity, immigration status, gender (including gender identity or expression), sexual orientation, disability, or military status;
- Be used to record or photograph First Amendment assemblies for the purpose of identifying participants who are not engaged in unlawful conduct;
- Be equipped with any weapon system or facial recognition software;
- Be used as a weapon;
- Be deployed when weather conditions or other hazards prevent the safe operation of the aircraft or in a manner exceeding the manufacturer 's recommendations;
- Be used for personal business of any kind; and,

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- Be used in a manner that is contrary to any additional restrictions imposed by the sUAS Program Manager or an sUAS Coordinator.

All on-duty sUAS deployments conducted during the reporting period were in full compliance with Department policy and State law.

**Note:** Two instances of off-duty use of personally owned sUAS occurred in connection with Department-sponsored events (e.g., a community fundraiser walk and an employee graduation). As these uses could be considered within the scope of the policy, the Department issued an Office of Special Operations Program Manager Notice, *Prohibition on Use of Personal Drones; and Permissible Use of sUAS –Reminder*, dated September 26, 2025, clarifying that the prohibition on non-Department sUAS applies to Department-sponsored events regardless of duty status.

*Number of sUAS Deployments*

In 2025, the Department conducted 2,550 sUAS flights under the DFR program. This total includes 83 flights utilizing the initial pilot hardware platform and 2,467 flights conducted using the fully deployed operational system. Approximately 500 of these flights were dedicated to training and testing to ensure operator proficiency and equipment readiness.

In addition, tactical sUAS assets were deployed 480 times in support of 41 field operations, reflecting the continued importance of drones in specialized and high-risk scenarios.

*Types of Situations for sUAS Deployment*

All DFR deployments are guided by Operations Order No. 3, *Drone as First Responder Pilot Program*, dated July 16, 2025, and are initiated through radio calls for service, officer requests, and planned special event operations. Operators are trained to identify incidents that are likely to benefit from aerial situational awareness, particularly those occurring in open environments, involving recently fleeing suspects, or presenting indications that a suspect may be concealed or armed.

Tactical sUAS deployments support a range of specialized operations, including:

- Operations by SWAT, such as barricaded suspect incidents, where drones provide real-time intelligence regarding suspect location and potential armament;
- Bomb Squad responses, including the assessment of suspicious packages and integration with existing technical equipment to enhance safety and efficiency of other robotics;
- Hazardous Materials incidents, where drones assist in obtaining remote measurements and situational data; and
- Multi-Disciplinary Collision Investigation Team (MCIT) responses, where aerial imagery supports advanced scene documentation and reconstruction.

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*Overall Results and Effectiveness of the sUAS Program*

The Department's use of sUAS in 2025 proved highly effective in reducing risk, enhancing operational outcomes, and improving resource efficiency.

Most notably, sUAS deployments mitigated risks to officers, suspects, and the public by reducing information gaps during rapidly evolving incidents and increasing the likelihood of safely locating and apprehending suspects who had recently fled crime scenes.

During high-risk operations, including warrant services, the SWAT Platoon deployed sUAS assets 33 times. In each instance, drones provided critical situational awareness, including identifying suspect locations within structures and assessing whether individuals were visibly armed. This capability enhanced officer safety while supporting de-escalation strategies by reducing the likelihood of unexpected encounters with armed individuals.

Similarly, the Bomb Squad and Hazardous Materials Section deployed sUAS during seven incidents to facilitate faster and more accurate assessments. The use of drones minimized the need for personnel to conduct close-range visual inspections of potentially dangerous items, thereby reducing exposure to explosives or hazardous materials. Additionally, the expedited evaluation and resolution of these incidents reduced the duration of potential threats to the public.

Under the DFR program, calls for service have been resolved with increased efficiency and reduced risk to both Department personnel and the community. The integration of sUAS into frontline response has enabled officers to obtain real-time intelligence that would otherwise be unavailable during the initial stages of an incident.

The DFR operators have successfully utilized drones in a variety of operational contexts, including locating suspects associated with stolen vehicles, identifying when individuals involved in calls for service were armed—thereby allowing responding officers to adjust tactics and avoid potentially dangerous encounters—and providing enhanced situational awareness during barricaded suspect incidents. Drones have also been used to monitor residential perimeters for signs of forced entry and to track suspects fleeing crime scenes on foot, among other applications. These capabilities have contributed to more informed decision-making, improved coordination, and safer outcomes.

In addition, while the Department continues to maintain an extraordinarily capable and nationally recognized helicopter program, the deployment of drones has expanded the overall availability and responsiveness of aerial support. The distributed drone-dock model of DFR allows for more rapid deployment to calls for service, often reducing response times compared to traditional aviation assets and increasing the number of incidents that can benefit from aerial observation.

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*Community Feedback*

The Department remains committed to actively incorporating community feedback into the ongoing development and oversight of its sUAS program. While the use of sUAS has received strong support from many community stakeholders, the Department recognizes that privacy concerns are held by some members of the public, and it continues to address those concerns through transparency and robust policy safeguards.

To promote accountability, all DFR flights are automatically displayed on a publicly accessible, real-time dashboard. This platform provides key information, including general flight paths, the nature of each deployment, and the corresponding date and time. In conjunction with strict controls governing data collection, retention, and access, this level of transparency reflects the Department's commitment to responsible, privacy-conscious use of sUAS technology.

Consistent with these efforts—and supported by ongoing community outreach and comprehensive internal oversight—the Department received no complaints related to sUAS operations during the 2025 reporting period.

*Nature of sUAS Collisions*

During 2025, the Department documented two sUAS-related collision incidents. Neither incident resulted in injuries to any person or damage to third-party property.

The first incident occurred on November 1, 2025, following a major sporting event that prompted large-scale public gatherings. While a DFR drone was deployed to support a crowd control operation, the aircraft experienced a loss of connectivity attributed to cellular network saturation in the immediate area. Based on witness accounts, the drone initiated an uncontrolled descent, made contact with a tree, and subsequently impacted the sidewalk. Following the landing, a bystander further damaged the aircraft and disposed of it in a trash receptacle. Due to the extent of the damage to the drone, onboard system logs were incomplete and did not fully capture the aircraft's behavior following the loss-of-link event.

The second incident occurred on November 5, 2025, during a nighttime deployment in response to an officer request. The sUAS, operating in fully manual mode, collided with the exterior façade of a high-rise building in the vicinity of Vermont Avenue and Wilshire Boulevard. The impact caused the aircraft to fall to the ground, where it struck the sidewalk.

Following this incident, the Department implemented additional safety protocols, including mandatory use of parachute recovery systems and defaulting to enabling all available technical assistance features, such as obstacle avoidance systems and low-light or night-vision capabilities. These measures are further supported by manufacturer-driven system enhancements, which improve operational safety while maintaining overall platform performance.

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Additionally, the Department implemented corrective measures to mitigate connectivity-borne risks in the future. All DFR platforms have since been equipped with “Fusion+” technology, enabling simultaneous connectivity across two independent, public safety-prioritized cellular networks, in addition to traditional radio frequency control. This redundancy significantly reduces the likelihood of connectivity loss due to network congestion and enhances overall system resilience.

*Recommendations for Changes to sUAS Policies or Guidelines*

The Department remains fully committed to the internal controls established under Special Order No. 4, ensuring safe, accountable, and policy-compliant use of sUAS.

At the same time, advancements in sUAS technology have significantly enhanced operational efficiency. For DFR deployments, the vendor’s cloud-based software now automatically uploads all recorded video and telemetry following drone landing at a docking station. The system also “tags” each recording with the incident number entered by the operator during the post-flight report. This end-to-end automated workflow eliminates the need for the sUAS Program Manager to manually cross-reference each flight record with Evidence.com data to verify completion. Given the exponential growth in flight volume, it is recommended that manual verification requirements be limited to flights not conducted under a fully automated, cloud-managed data platform, thereby maintaining efficiency while preserving accountability.

Additionally, the Department recognizes the critical importance of properly managing sUAS collisions, which are subject to federal reporting requirements. It is recommended that procedures for any applicable reporting of collisions to the FAA, National Transportation Safety Board (NTSB), or Office of the Inspector General (OIG) be revised to consolidate reporting responsibility under the sUAS Program Manager. This approach aligns with the draft “Part 108” rules governing autonomous drone operations, which contemplate that each organization maintain a single point of contact for critical incident reporting. Consolidation of reporting responsibility will ensure timely, consistent, and compliant communication with federal authorities while streamlining internal oversight.

**Conclusion.** The Department’s expanded use of sUAS technology in 2025 represented a significant advancement in the delivery of modern, data-driven public safety services. Through the successful implementation of the Drone as a First Responder program and the continued use of tactical sUAS assets, the Department has enhanced situational awareness, improved response efficiency, and reduced risk to both personnel and the community. These outcomes have been achieved while maintaining strict adherence to established policy safeguards, robust oversight, and a demonstrated commitment to transparency and privacy. As technology continues to evolve, the Department remains committed to responsibly expanding its sUAS capabilities, refining operational practices, and ensuring that innovation is balanced with accountability, ultimately strengthening its ability to protect and serve the public.