



# NEW ORLEANS POLICE DEPARTMENT OPERATIONS MANUAL

## CHAPTER: 43.5

### TITLE: UNMANNED AIRCRAFT SYSTEMS (sUAS / Drones)

**EFFECTIVE: 2/7/2024**

**REVISED: 6/21/2026, 7/1/2026**

---

#### **PURPOSE**

The deployment of small Unmanned Aircraft Systems (sUAS) ("drones") by the New Orleans Police Department (NOPD) is expected to assist the agency by enhancing officer and public safety and improving the quality of investigations. Deployments of this technology will be in direct support of calls for service, emergency events, crime scene and vehicular accident forensics collection, tactical operations, officer training, disaster response and other missions requiring aerial surveillance within a Defined Incident Perimeter (DIP).

#### **POLICY STATEMENT**

It is the policy of the NOPD that sUAS shall be deployed only for specific public safety missions, in compliance with all applicable laws, and only by trained and authorized personnel.

This Chapter is not intended to be all-inclusive, but instead shall serve as a supplement to other NOPD Chapters, policies and procedures, applicable national aviation authority regulations, and sUAS manufacturers' approved flight manuals.

#### **DEFINITIONS**

**Authorization/Waiver** – For the purposes of this chapter, Authorization/Waiver is a document issued by the Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) allowing authorized flight within a certain airspace or allowing operations deviating from standard allowable 14 CFR 107 rules.

**Beyond Visual Line of Sight (BVLOS)** – The operation of a small unmanned aircraft system (sUAS/drone) outside of the pilot's direct line of sight.

**Defined Incident Perimeter (DIP)** – A defined perimeter to be determined based on the scope of the operation and a defined operational ceiling above the ground.

**Digital Media Evidence (DME)** - Digital recordings of images, sounds, and associated data.

**Drone as a First Responder (DFR)** – An sUAS program using a semi-autonomous drone launched from a docking station to provide real-time aerial support with responding to calls for service and emergency scenes.

**Drone Program Coordinators** – Individuals designated by the Superintendent of Police to oversee the administrative operations of NOPD drone programs.

**Remote Pilot Certificate** – A required certification under 14 CFR Part 107 – Small Unmanned Aircraft Systems. The Remote Pilot Certificate demonstrates pilots understand the regulations, operating requirements, and procedures for safely flying drones.

**Remote Pilot in Command (RPIC)** - The individual with the final authority and responsibility for operation and safety of a sUAS operation.

**Small Unmanned Aircraft System (sUAS)** - An unmanned aircraft and its associated elements, including communication links and the components that control the aircraft that are required for safe and efficient operation.

**Temporary Flight Restrictions (TFR)** – The restriction of an area of airspace due to the nature of the airspace, special events taking place, the movement of dignitaries, or other events. The TFR will contain the location of the restricted airspace, the effective time periods, and the altitudes affected by the restriction.

**Unmanned Aircraft** - An aircraft that is operated without direct human intervention from within or on the aircraft. Also called remote piloted aircraft or drones.

**Visual Observer (VO)** - A sUAS flight crewmember designated by the RPIC to assist with the responsibility to identify and avoid other air traffic or objects in the air or on the ground.

**sUAS Deployment** – The operational flight(s) of an sUAS for any purpose outside of training and/or testing. A deployment may consist of several flights for a single event or incident (i.e., special event overwatch deployments, incident responses requiring multiple flights, etc.).

## PROCEDURES

### Program Administration

1. NOPD sUAS may be used to support NOPD operations, including assisting with responding to calls for service, or to assist other law enforcement agency operations.
2. All sUAS operations shall be limited to those personnel approved by the Superintendent of Police and NOPD personnel who have been designated as RPICs, visual observers, persons permitted to manipulate the sUAS controls, and others deemed necessary to ensure safe and efficient operations. A list of approved personnel shall be maintained and updated by the Management Services Bureau (MSB) and provided to PSAB for quarterly data reviews.
3. To enhance the level of safety and promote appropriate use of sUAS, all procedures contained herein shall be followed without deviation, unless necessary during an emergency, or with approval from the Captain overseeing the operation, a Deputy Chief, or the Superintendent of Police. All deviation approvals shall be documented in an interoffice correspondence within 24 hours of being granted by the authorizing supervisor.

### Drone Program Coordinator Responsibilities

4. Each District/Division utilizing a DFR program will have a drone program coordinator responsible for

overseeing the administrative functions of the program.

5. For all drone operations outside of DFR programs the designated coordinator will be assigned from the Special Operations Division.
6. The Drone Program Coordinators are responsible for the following:
  - a. Reviewing and ensuring all Post-Flight Reports are properly completed and available to the Professional Standards Section.
  - b. Publishing all Post-Flight Reports after review on a public dashboard.
  - c. Ensuring any safety, equipment, or maintenance concerns documented in Post-Flight Reports are addressed.
  - d. Coordinating the FAA Certificate of Waiver application process and ensuring all waivers are current.
  - e. Ensuring all drone operators under their program are compliant with FAA Part 107 Remote Pilot Certifications, laws, policies, and procedures, as appropriate for agency operations.
7. The Drone Program Coordinators shall maintain logs that contain the current status of all devices owned by NOPD, under their responsibility. These logs shall be made available for review by the Professional Standards Section.

### **Personnel Qualifications and Training**

8. All RPICs shall hold the appropriate credentials required for the sUAS operated by the RPIC and the type of flight conducted by the RPIC. This includes:
  - a. A valid FAA Part 107 Certification
  - b. Basic and Specific for Beyond Visual Line of Sight training with a certified pilot (for pilots operating a DFR).
  - c. The appropriate Authorization/Waiver to operate an sUAS under circumstances that require it (i.e., TFR flights, flights over crowds, etc.).
9. All sUAS program personnel shall receive training necessary to safely, efficiently, and effectively manage or operate sUAS, to include initial and recurrent training, documented in the department's designated learning management system.
10. All sUAS program personnel shall receive training in the legal aspects of sUAS use.

### **Operational Procedures**

11. NOPD sUAS operations shall comply with the guidelines from the applicable national aviation authority.
12. All non-DFR sUAS missions shall be approved by a supervisor.
13. Supervisory personnel shall manage all deployments and uses of sUAS to ensure that officers equipped with sUAS devices utilize them in accordance with NOPD Chapters, Standard Operating Guidelines, policies, and procedures defined herein.
14. All deployments shall be documented by the end of the operating member's next tour of duty using the post-flight report. The post-flight report shall include information:
  - a. The type of incident (i.e., the reason for the flight);

- b. the time, date, duration, Takeoff Address of the flight, and all GPS and/or telemetry data;
  - c. the Drone ID of the sUAS;
  - d. The names and information of the RPIC and all visual observers;
  - e. The names of the supervisor approving the deployment; and
  - f. A summary of the activities conducted, actions taken, and outcomes from the deployment.
  - g. Whether the use was effective for the intended purpose;
  - h. If there were any safety concerns because of the use;
  - i. Any equipment concerns.
15. When practical, unless notification may jeopardize officer safety or an investigation, NOPD will notify the public in the area of the flight, using social media, emergency alert systems, and/or any other official means of NOPD communication to the public for the following types of deployments:
- a. Hazardous Materials Incidents,
  - b. Special Events / First Amendment Assemblies,
  - c. Storm Damage Assessments, and
  - d. Searches for missing or lost persons.
16. Where there are specific and articulable grounds to believe that the sUAS shall collect evidence of criminal wrongdoing and the sUAS shall be used in a manner that may intrude upon reasonable expectations of privacy, members shall obtain a search warrant prior to conducting the flight.
17. NOPD shall only use sUAS-collected data to the extent that such collection or use is consistent with and relevant to an authorized purpose within the confines of this chapter and the law.
18. On all DFR sUAS deployments and other deployments originating away from the scene of the deployment's purpose RPICs should make every attempt to ensure sUAS cameras are pointed toward the horizon and not capturing images of the areas below the sUAS where individuals may enjoy a right to privacy while flying to or from the scene.
19. Incident scene documentation using sUAS shall be documented under the same item number as the incident properly labeled and entered into Evidence.com.
20. NOPD sUAS use is approved for the following situations:
- a. Drone as First Responder (DFR) operations. – NOPD sUAS may be used to respond to calls for service and emergency scenes to provide real-time aerial support.
  - b. Hazardous Materials Incidents – The sUAS may be used for imagery, to include the use of thermography, to determine the incident type (i.e., spill/leak/vapor release), product/agent being released, assist with determining operational zones such as “Hot/Warm/Cold” zones, assist with assessment of spread area including into waterways, as well as determine areas of evacuation/shelter in place.
  - c. Rescue Operations – The sUAS may be used for delivery of equipment and supplies including, but not limited to, rope rescue lines, Personal Flotation Devices (PFD), communications equipment, and medical supplies (must be within the guidelines of the payload capacity for the sUAS).
  - d. Special Events / First Amendment Assemblies – The sUAS shall not be used to intimidate or hinder any person from exercising their First Amendment protections, or to take enforcement action against a person for exercising their rights. The sUAS may be used for imagery during special events or incidents involving large gatherings where the sUAS may be used to guide law enforcement and emergency personnel to requests for assistance.

- i. The sUAS shall not be used for purposes of harassing, intimidating, or deploying any specialized weapons against participants of any special event or First Amendment Assembly or for collecting data on or tracking participants for non-criminal activity.
  - ii. If an sUAS is used to observe police or civilian actions during any first amendment assembly the supervisor approving the use of the sUAS, or their designee, must notify OPCD of the drone use during the first amendment assembly and the area in which the drone is being used. The supervisor, or their designee, must also ensure NOPD's Public Information Office (PIO) is aware of the drone use and posts public announcement informing the public that an sUAS will be used during the event in the area to observe the actions of both police and civilians during the event. This announcement shall be posted publicly prior to the use of the sUAS.
- e. Storm Damage Assessment – The sUAS may be used for imagery after a severe weather event to determine affected areas as well as to assess the severity of damage in order to define and prioritize operational areas and needs. The imagery may also be used to locate available access routes into damaged areas.
- f. Searching for Missing or Lost persons – The sUAS may be used for imagery, to include the use of thermography, to assist in the search for missing or lost persons utilizing live imagery as well as recorded imagery that can be reviewed during search operations.
- g. SWAT / Tactical Operations – The sUAS may be used for imagery, to include the use of thermography, and intelligence gathering during planning and execution of high-risk events, i.e., barricaded suspects, hostage negotiations / rescues, etc. Thermography may not be used to specifically target a private residence to locate a known subject inside without a search warrant.
- h. Suspect Searches – The sUAS may be used to assist law enforcement with imagery, including the use of thermography, by conducting searches for suspects in instances where an officer has probable cause to believe a fleeing suspect is hiding in a designated area. Search warrants are required for searches for known wanted subjects who were not in the process of fleeing from apprehension or are believed to be inside of a privately owned structure.
- i. Vehicle Crash Investigations – The sUAS may be used for imagery, to include a 360° panoramic view, to assist with origin/cause, determination of fault and evidence documentation.
- j. Crime Scene Investigations - The sUAS may be used for imagery to assist Criminal Investigators and Crime Scene Investigators in the documentation of crime scenes and evidence.
- k. Post-Critical Incident Reviews / Reconstruction – The sUAS may be used for imagery to assist with post-incident reviews and/or reconstruction.
- l. The sUAS may be used for imagery during operational critiques of events (post event) in order to gain knowledge concerning deployment of the sUAS and personnel. The sUAS may also be used during training to critique tactical deployment of the sUAS and personnel to develop enhanced strategies during missions.
- m. The sUAS may only be used during ongoing criminal investigations or surveillance operations involving a specific target person(s) or location pursuant to a valid search warrant or other

judicial approval, if necessary, and in accordance with all applicable laws and the regulations of this department (See Chapter [1.2.4.2 – Search Warrants](#)).

- n. Other uses of the sUAS not contemplated by this policy, including DFR deployments, may be approved by the Superintendent of police, in writing.

### **DFR Operations**

21. All DFR pilots must maintain all the requirements to safely and legally operate an sUAS in accordance with this chapter and all applicable laws.
22. If a DFR pilot does not have the appropriate waivers to fly BVLOS, they must ensure multiple visual observers are available along the entirety of the sUAS flight path, or justify the exigent circumstance that prompted the need to fly BVLOS without a visual observer (the call for service itself may not be the sole justification).
23. In the event multiple visual observers are utilized throughout the deployment of the sUAS, the RPIC must document each visual observer in the post-flight report.
24. DFR pilots require access to the Computer Aided Dispatch (CAD) system to assist with reviewing comments on calls and specific locations provided by reporting persons in order to safely and efficiently provide an immediate response, before, during, and immediately after the dispatching of calls for service.
25. The drone program coordinator overseeing DFR operations will work to ensure a certified RPIC and a supervisor are available for DFR operations at all times.
26. When a DFR RPIC is available to respond to calls for service, they shall notify dispatch of their availability and login through the CAD system. Upon deployment of the sUAS, the RPIC must advise OPCD and district/division units of the sUAS response.
27. The RPIC during DFR deployments must communicate, over the district/division dispatch channel, any hazards, suspect locations, evidence locations, and any other pertinent information that may be helpful to responding officers.
28. Calls for service for which an sUAS is deployed should be prioritized in the following order:
  - a. Priority 1 – Incidents involving injuries or where human life may be in danger.
  - b. Priority 2 – Incidents involving requiring protection or recovery of property.
  - c. Priority 3 – Low priority (code 1) calls for service where no life or property is threatened.
29. When requested, DFR responses may be used to assist other agencies and City departments with aerial support in the area.

### **Criminal Investigations and/or Targeted Surveillance Operations**

30. The use of an sUAS for ongoing criminal investigations or targeted surveillance shall be authorized only for those crimes listed under Section 147-2(d) or felony narcotic investigations involving distribution, manufacturing, or drug trafficking, including possession with intent to distribute.
31. Officers shall be aware the use of an sUAS to search a specified property or observe activity in an area where someone has a reasonable expectation of privacy for the purpose of obtaining information constitutes a search and may only be conducted in accordance with all applicable laws and the regulations of this department ([See Chapter 1.2.4.2 – Search Warrants](#)).

32. The use of an sUAS for ongoing criminal investigations or surveillance operations involving specific target person(s) or location(s) shall be authorized by a supervisor at the level of Captain or above, documented in writing, and may only be conducted pursuant to a valid search warrant documenting with specificity the probable cause for the use of the surveillance, the length of time sought for authorization to use an sUAS for surveillance.
33. When requesting use of an sUAS for an ongoing criminal investigation, a member shall:
  - a. Send a written request, by email, to their supervisor and the drone program coordinator, detailing the probable cause for the use of the equipment, the length or amount of times monitoring may be needed, and why traditional surveillance is not preferable or has failed.
  - b. The drone program coordinator shall coordinate with the Deputy Chiefs of FOB, ISB and PIB to ensure the surveillance will not interfere with a current ongoing investigation.
  - c. Attach the written request to their investigative report to be maintained with the case file.
34. All Supervisors overseeing an investigation which utilizes an sUAS shall ensure that:
  - a. Devices are only deployed in accordance with the procedures established in this chapter
  - b. Devices are only utilized for ongoing criminal investigations pursuant to all applicable laws and the regulations of this department.
35. Investigators utilizing an sUAS for ongoing criminal investigations or active surveillance shall document the reasons for the request, the dates of the use of the device, and all information obtained from the use of the device in an investigative report.

### **DME Retention and Management**

36. All DME captured, recorded, or otherwise produced by the equipment is the sole property of the NOPD, and subject to public records requests within legal limitations.
37. All DME shall be handled in accordance with existing Chapters and policies on data and records retention, where applicable.
38. The sUAS RPIC shall record information for each file that shall include the date, time, location, and case reference numbers or other mission identifiers and those NOPD personnel involved in mission.
39. Members shall not edit, alter, erase, duplicate, copy, share, or otherwise distribute DME in any manner without prior authorization from the Superintendent of Police or their designee.
40. All access to sUAS DME shall be specifically authorized, in writing, by the Deputy Chief of PSAB or their designee, and all access is to be reviewed by PSAB to ensure only authorized users are accessing the data and only for legitimate and authorized purposes.
41. All DME shall be securely downloaded at the completion of each deployment. The DME with all authorizations and any other sUAS files should be securely stored in accordance with NOPD policy and appropriate records retention laws and retained no longer than necessary for purposes of training or for use in an investigation or prosecution.

42. All video recordings and still images captured during any NOPD drone flight shall be uploaded to Evidence.com. Any DME uploaded to Evidence.com shall be access restricted if it contains information regarding operational security on tactical deployments or crime scene evidence of a sensitive nature (i.e., Critical Incidents).

### **Restrictions on the use of sUAS**

43. The sUAS shall be deployed and used only to support official law enforcement and public safety missions.
44. NOPD prohibits the use of facial recognition technology to examine imagery captured by a sUAS to identify people who have open warrants or participate in any First Amendment Assemblies. However, if during the operation of an sUAS, footage is captured of a crime enumerated under Section 147-2(d) of the New Orleans Municipal Code, a still image of the suspect may be extracted from the footage and submitted for facial recognition analysis.
45. Facial Recognition Technology will not be used to conduct facial surveillance during the operation of an NOPD sUAS.
46. The sUAS shall not be operated in an unsafe manner or in violation of regulations.
47. The sUAS shall not be equipped with weapons or hazardous materials of any kind.
48. Tactical deployment of the sUAS shall be governed by standard operating procedures established by SOD, within the guidelines of this chapter.
49. If an sUAS is used to assist an outside agency or organization, through request, Cooperating Endeavor Agreement, or Memorandum of Understanding, the sUAS must be used and operated within the guidelines of this chapter.
50. NOPD sUAS will not be utilized under any of the following conditions:
  - a. Missions that would violate FAA regulations, including operations within restricted airspace without authorization, such as areas of Temporary Flight Restrictions (TFR); restricted airspaces near airports, specifically within 2 miles of approaches or within a 5-mile radius of any airport until communications have been established with the airport manager, Air Traffic Control (ATC) tower, or general air traffic via radio.
  - b. Manned aircraft operations within the same local airspace as a sUAS mission. For the safety of the aircrew and national air space in general, all sUAS shall yield the right of way to manned aircraft. The exception to this rule is if a TFR has been established and the manager of the TFR airspace has established altitudes and rules in which sUAS and manned aircraft can operate within the same airspace. Even with a managed TFR, the sUAS shall yield to manned aircraft to avoid collision. This includes the destruction of the sUAS if necessary.
  - c. Weather conditions that would likely cause the loss of pilot control of the sUAS. These thresholds will depend upon the physical capabilities and design of the sUAS.
  - d. The sUAS shall not be operated above an altitude of 400 feet Above Ground Level (AGL), except in those situations allowed by FAA regulations.
  - e. The sUAS shall not be operated where the RPIC, or the Visual Observers cannot visually

observe the sUAS or its operations, except in exigent circumstances; or with a waiver as required by FAA Regulations. This excludes indoor operations, outside of the national airspace.

- f. sUAS shall not be operated if the RPIC determines conditions to be unsafe. The sUAS RPIC has the final decision as to whether the aircraft will be flown.
- g. The sUAS and all accompanying DME shall not be operated or used in any situation that would violate NOPD policies governing general rules of conduct including violation of local/state/federal laws, activities considered harassment, use of alcohol or illegal drugs, and actions deemed to be unsafe.

### **Complaint Investigations**

- 51. Should there be a complaint alleging inappropriate use of the sUAS, the complaint shall be handled in accordance with NOPD Chapter 52.1 – Complaint Intake and Investigation.
- 52. Any complaint alleging a violation of a person's civil rights by use of the sUAS shall be documented and investigated by the Public Integrity Bureau, unless a member of the Public Integrity Bureau is the accused.
- 53. Unauthorized or inappropriate use of an sUAS will result in strict accountability, in accordance with established disciplinary procedures.

### **Safety**

- 54. All sUAS operations shall have a safety program based on the principles of an aviation safety management system.
- 55. All sUAS personnel shall receive appropriate safety training, coordinated through the NOPD Education and Training Division.

### **sUAS Accidents**

- 56. All accidents involving NOPD sUAS will be reported through the RPIC's chain of command immediately following the incident, when safe to do so. All accidents will be documented via an incident report. In the event of injury or property damage, NOPD Risk Management will be notified and provided with a copy of the incident report within 5 days of the accident.
- 57. Accident reporting will be conducted in accordance with [CFR 14 Part 107.9](#). All FAA notifications will be handled by, or under the supervision of, the RPIC's supervisor. The following incidents will require notification to the FAA no later than 10 days following the incident:
  - a. Serious injury, or death, to any person or any loss of consciousness.
  - b. Damage to any property, other than the sUAS, unless one of the following conditions exists:
    - i. The cost of repair (including materials and labor) does not exceed \$500; or
    - ii. The fair market value of the property does not exceed \$500 in the event of a total loss.

### **Maintenance**

58. Each sUAS shall be inspected by NOPD personnel assigned to house and maintain their unit's sUAS on a monthly basis to determine if additional maintenance is necessary. The inspection shall be conducted in accordance with the manufacturer's recommendations and electronically logged into the designated sUAS fleet management system .
59. If any ongoing legal action results from or involves the operation of the sUAS, all records pertaining to the operation or maintenance of the sUAS shall be maintained until all possible legal actions have been adjudicated.
60. The sUAS program shall have a documented maintenance program to include manufacturer's recommendations.
61. The maintenance program shall describe who is authorized to perform maintenance on the sUAS and the required training for those personnel.
62. Records shall be kept of all maintenance performed on NOPD sUAS.

#### **Data Review and Annual Reporting**

63. All NOPD personnel assigned to maintain and operate an sUAS shall ensure all Post-Flight Reports and any other data captured is accessible for review by NOPD's Professional Standards Section.
64. The Drone Program Coordinators shall ensure all information captured in the post-flight reports is properly updating to the Department's designated public-facing dashboard unless operational security or privacy concerns prevent the information from being provided publicly.