

‘Trooper Air’ Stepped Up as Pandemic Took Hold



DPS Aircraft Operations Increased 42% as the Pandemic Reduced Commercial Air Options



Alaska State Troopers load prisoners onto a DPS King Air aircraft in Kotzebue in 2016.

By Austin McDaniel

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Transporting prisoners across Alaska’s vast distances is a challenge on a good day, but when you add dangerous winter storms and the COVID-19 outbreak, most would call the task near impossible. However, this challenge doesn’t stop the nearly 400 Alaska State and Wildlife Troopers that patrol the nation’s largest state.

The Alaska Department of Public Safety uses everything from patrol cars, state aircraft, commercial air carriers, snow machines, vessels, and ATVs to bring prisoners to a regional jail operated by a local community or the Alaska Department of Corrections. It can take a lot of logistical planning to arrest an individual in a remote community

in Alaska and safely transport that person to a regional jail. While law enforcement agencies in the lower 48 and urban Alaska generally only need to drive prisoners in their custody to a local pretrial facility – there can be hundreds of miles of Alaska wilderness between a trooper and the nearest secure holding facility. Some prisoners are transported over 800 miles to facilities in Anchorage, which is the equivalent of traveling from Seattle, Washington to San Diego, California without the benefit of roads.

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*– C Detachment Commander,
Captain Andrew Merrill*



Court Services Officers in Anchorage operate a prisoner transport van.

aspects,” said C Detachment Commander, Captain Andrew Merrill. “The Department of Public Safety has over 50 pilots and over 43 aircraft along with multiple vessels, snow machines, and ATVs which all have their place in solving the rural Alaska travel challenge.”

In 2020 when the COVID-19 pandemic was beginning to take hold in Alaska, the regional and statewide air carriers, which have carried troopers as well as prisoners in custody across the state for years, began to reduce their service as demand dropped; the demand for troopers in rural Alaska did not drop along with nonessential travel. The reduced commercial flight options added a whole new logistical challenge to getting troopers and their gear into rural Alaska communities as well as transporting prisoners.

Last year, the DPS aircraft section increased normal flight operations by 42% to over 7,100 total flight hours, and hired temporary pilots to fill the gap temporarily left by commercial operators. If you put DPS next to a commercial air operator, it would be the third-largest in the state. Without “Trooper Air’s” response to the pandemic, the

travel time for getting troopers to calls-for-service or from hub cities to the villages they work in would have increased dramatically. In some situations, without state aircraft to get troopers to law enforcement calls for service, communities would wait days for a trooper to get there.

Not only do arresting State Troopers and Wildlife Troopers need to transport prisoners to regional pretrial facilities across the state, but DPS Court Services Officers (CSO) transport thousands of prisoners each year to criminal court hearings across the state. Sometimes this is from jail to court and back, all within the same town, but CSOs regularly transfer prisoners from smaller regional jails to larger pretrial facilities in Anchorage, Fairbanks, Kenai, or Juneau for their court hearings. These transports can involve a specialized prisoner transport van, commercial flight, or a state aircraft, depending on the number of prisoners needing to be moved.

2020 was proof that not even a pandemic can stop troopers from making arrests and safely bringing the prisoner to jail – regardless of the conditions or distance.