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Urbandale rescue pilot hopes app will take flight

The technology could help helicopters reach patients faster

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Now's Jim Cooper: Heli-Now founder Jim Cooper has created an app to help save time for helicopter emergency medical services providers. Cooper used several Iowa firms to build the application, but which will launch with a copter company in Minnesota.

Written by **Marco Santana**

Jim Cooper believes he can save lives with his flying skills and his entrepreneurial ideas.

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A Life Flight helicopter pilot, Cooper has released an iPhone application he hopes can help save the lives of flight crew patients by reducing the time it takes for a first responder's help call to reach a pilot.

The release comes about two weeks after a fatal crash that killed a crew on board a rescue helicopter in northern Iowa. Cooper, a 31-year-old Urbandale resident, said delays in communication cost highly trained flight crews several minutes in an environment where minutes can mean the difference between saving a life and getting

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to an accident or pickup site just a bit late.

“Instead of getting a message more than five minutes later, our app will request a ‘helo’ immediately,” Cooper said. “That five minutes could be a big deal.”

But selling the idea to other industry professionals has not been easy. Cooper approached management of Des Moines Life Flight, which is run by Air Methods Corp., along with Iowa Methodist Medical Center officials, to gauge their interest. After several meetings, they declined, saying that the Heli-Now application is too new and that some of the features within the application, such as GPS-based location reporting, are already in place.



Jim Cooper of Urbandale released an app that he hopes will save lives. / RODNEY WHITE/REGISTER PHOTOS

“I can’t fault them for saying they don’t want to be the first out of the chute,” Cooper said.

Four Iowa companies worked together to build the app, which has cost Cooper roughly \$90,000 out of his own pocket to develop as an iPhone version. An Android version is on the way.

The final version of the application has just been submitted to the Apple Store. It is free to download but will require an access code to use.

Cooper said he was disappointed it won’t be used in Iowa right away. Life Link, an air ambulance agency in Minneapolis, has signed on to be the first customer once the iPhone application is fully operational.

Some national experts said Cooper’s idea could have a big role in the future. Stubb Buckingham, president of the National EMS Pilots Association, said the application could be a big hit because it gives paramedics better control over the helicopters that respond to a call. However, he said he expected Cooper to face some obstacles.

“Right now, the way the system is set up, there will be some legalities he will have to go through to make sure the right aircraft is involved,” he said. However, “he’s on the right track. There is potential in what he’s

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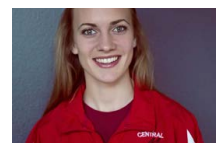
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trying to do, but the legalities and restrictions, he'll have to work around. But he may have a million-dollar product."

The Heli-Now application will give first responders access to a list of nearby helicopter firms that have signed up for the service and allow them to request help from the nearest one. A text message is then sent with the responder's location, request and work information to the dispatch center, pilot and medical crew.

Once the flight heads to the exact location of an incident, the paramedic and dispatcher can speak directly to each other for more information.

Under the present system, Cooper said, location information takes a bit longer to determine, and pilots sometimes take off without knowing exactly where they are headed. Only midflight do pilots get exact locations and alter their flight plans accordingly.

On Jan. 2, a Mercy Air Med helicopter crashed just north of Ventura, killing the pilot and two crew members aboard.

It was an illustration of the danger pilots face every day and every flight. Cooper, who has been a Life Flight helicopter pilot for six years after leading tours in Phoenix for several years, said he has lost friends and fellow pilots. "We're a little more desensitized to it, I think," he said. "We love flying. But as long as people are trying to defy gravity, things will go bad."

Despite the tragedy, however, flight nurses said it is part of the business they decided to join.

"It's the best job in the world and it's one reason I continue on, even given light of recent incidents," said Rick Kallemeier, a nurse based out of Iowa Methodist Medical Center. "We love what we do, and that is why we go out every day, put our flight suits on and spin around."

Life Flight program manager Michael Zweigart said the accident has made helicopter emergency medical service providers look

over their safety protocol.

“Whether in our own backyard or across the nation, it makes you think about the procedures and policies you have in place,” he said. “But it’s also an opportunity to reflect on your job. An incident like this strengthens your bond with them.”

Zweigart, who made the decision to pass on Heli-Now, said that the idea definitely had potential but that it was just not the right time for them to sign on.

“As it develops, it certainly may have a role in the industry,” he said.

When Cooper’s bosses rejected him, the first-time entrepreneur felt the sting that many who start a business have felt: that the “great idea” he had was nothing more than a dream.

“You always have doubts,” he said. “You have those bad days where you wonder if people will use it or if you’re just throwing money away. But I’m a firm believer that this is a great idea.”

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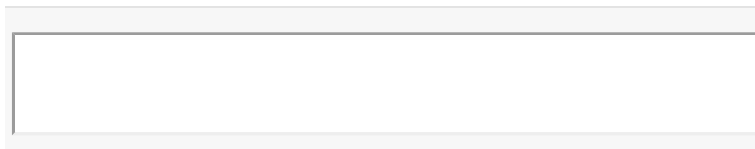
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