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OCSD to serve as Orange County’s primary Search and Rescue agency in remote areas

SANTA ANA, Ca. (Jan. 16, 2018) - The Orange County Sheriff’s Department (OCSD) will serve as the County’s primary responders for remote-area rescues as an agreement with the Orange County Fire Authority (OCFA) for a dual-agency approach expires today.

A 2016 Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) took a dual-agency approach for air search and rescue missions in remote wilderness and park areas. The MOU was set to expire in August 2017, however Sheriff Sandra Hutchens has extended the MOU multiple times. Sheriff Hutchens announced today she will not issue another extension.

“It is in the public’s best interest that the Sheriff’s Department serve as primary provider for remote-area search and rescue missions,” Hutchens said. “Air rescues in remote and wildland areas represent one facet in a comprehensive Search and Rescue program that has been serving county residents for more than 70 years.”

The Sheriff’s Department founded its Search and Rescue program in 1947, introducing an air support component starting in 1985. Initially, OCSD aircraft had limited ability to provide rescue operations due to the fact that aircraft did not have hoist capability. Since then, the OCSD Aviation Support Unit has expanded its capabilities and is now outfitted with two UHIH helicopters with hoist capability for various types of rescues, including tactical medical missions. OCSD’s Aviation Support Unit is accredited as an Advanced Life Support program.

On June 5, 2017, the Sheriff gave 60-day notice to the OCFA of her intent to terminate the existing MOU. At the Aug. 8, 2017, Board of Supervisors meeting, Sheriff Hutchens committed OCSD to mediation with OCFA regarding the Air Search and Rescue MOU. OCSD and OCFA met with a mediator and ideas were exchanged in good faith, but a resolution was not reached. Sheriff Hutchens has opted to proceed utilizing guidelines reflective of statewide best practices and consistent with the Search and Rescue Model Operating Plan developed by the State of California’s Office of Emergency Services.

“I am committed to working collaboratively with the Orange County Fire Authority and all other mutual-aid agencies to deliver the best public safety services to the citizens of Orange County,” Sheriff Hutchens said. “Our agencies work together closely on a regular basis and those partnerships will continue.”