



LAW
ENFORCEMENT
GUIDE TO
IMPLEMENTING
DRONES

Table of Contents

INTRODUCTION	03
1. GET A TEAM OF THE RIGHT PEOPLE ON BOARD	04
2. DO YOUR HOMEWORK	08
3. TAKE YOUR TIME WITH POLICIES AND PROCEDURES	10
4. CREATIVE SUGGESTIONS FOR ACQUIRING A DRONE	11
ABOUT POWERDMS	13

Introduction

Drones are rapidly making their way into both the hobbyist and commercialist space. With this new advent of technology comes new ways to help law enforcement serve and protect more effectively.

You may think that drones are too complicated, too expensive, or too risky to implement in your law enforcement agency. It's true that new technology always comes with risks, but drones can be a useful tool in policing and public safety.

The police department in Elgin, Illinois is in the midst of rolling out a new drone program in partnership with the city's fire department. We spoke with some of the Elgin Police Department's key stakeholders about how they plan to utilize drones to help their community. The conversation revealed that implementing drones in your agency may be challenging, but it is not as difficult as it sounds. In fact, it's doable for almost anyone.

With varying budgets and state regulations, it's impossible to come up with a one-size-fits-all approach to implementing drones in law enforcement. But in the following pages, we've distilled some of the takeaways from our conversation with the Elgin Police Department. You can use this comprehensive, step-by-step guide as a template for your own drone program, or as a conversation-starter for what a drone program in your agency may entail.

1. Get a Team of the Right People on Board

A law enforcement drone program should be a collaborative effort. Forming a team of stakeholders will help you think through how to build the most effective drone program for your department.

Internal collaborators

Commander Ana Lalley of the Elgin Police Department was quick to cite building an internal team as the first step in implementing drones in a police agency. “The people that are the most enthusiastic and passionate about drones and piloting already are the ones who will get things done,” she said.

Officer Snow, another member of the Elgin Police Department, plays an active role in the new drone program. Snow is no stranger to the skies. As a licensed and experienced pilot, he knows a great deal about FAA regulations and the mechanics of navigating the airspace.

Not only is Snow equipped with much of the necessary regulatory knowledge needed to fly drones, but he also has a passion for teaching others how drones operate and how they help. This makes him an invaluable asset in the planning and implementation of Elgin’s drone program.

External collaborators

One of the most commendable things about Elgin PD is their strong relationship with the Elgin Fire Department. In fact, it was the fire department who initially purchased the drones. Now, the police and fire department work together in a true spirit of community, sharing the drone for things like traffic accident reproduction. Without this collaboration, it’s possible the new drone program wouldn’t exist at all.

Takeaways:

- Find one or two members of your staff who are interested in investing in a drone program
- Task them with researching budget constraints, local laws, and documenting ideal uses for the drone
- Explore partnering with other local agencies to help offset the cost of drone hardware

Get buy-in from stakeholders

For some, the mere mention of drones conjures up negative imagery. The word is often coupled with phrases like “strikes” or “surveillance.” All of this can make community members wary of law enforcement drone use. Getting the approval of your community often involves reassuring them of your motives, being transparent about how you plan to use drones, and enforcing strict policies and training for how they’ll be implemented.

Implementing a drone program will affect your agency, your community, and your city’s leadership as a whole. You’ll need to work to get buy-in from all three.

Your agency

The rank-and-file officers in your agency will be the ones who are ultimately responsible for using the drones in their day-to-day work. So it’s important to get their feedback about drone implementation.

Of course, this doesn’t mean running your agency on popular opinion, but if you get a large amount of pushback from your team, you’ll want to address their concerns before implementing the program. Use a tool like [PowerDMS](#) to send out surveys and gather feedback to ensure your officers support the program.



Your city council

In order to successfully operate drones in your area, you'll need to make sure that your city's leadership is on board with the program. Commander Lalley of the Elgin PD took great pains to ensure the department's drone effort was in step with the city council's vision for Elgin's future. The department prepared a comprehensive presentation for the city officials. This helped the department's leaders adequately answer any questions and make sure the drone program cooperated with city ordinances.

Your community

Without the buy-in of your community, there's no point in even entertaining the idea of a drone program. Once you've gotten buy-in from your agency and city leaders, it's time to get buy-in from the most important stakeholder of all: the community you serve.

Commander Lalley offered her approach: "Start talking about the program early. Take the temperature of your community well before you plan on releasing the program. If you can address objections early, you'll be in much better shape."

Elgin PD wanted to be transparent about their intentions for drone use. They held a public forum—broadcasting the event on [social media](#)—where they opened up the floor to questions or objections.

Commander Lalley's biggest suggestion for overcoming objections was simply to be very clear and honest about how your agency will and will not use the drones. Elgin PD as well as all Illinois law enforcement agencies are bound by the state of Illinois' Freedom from Drone Surveillance Act, and therefore have strict standards on their drone use. They've ensured their policies and training reflect that.

Lalley offered some of the following ways drones could be used:

- Managing terrorist threats
- Locating missing persons or escaping subjects
- Analyzing traffic accident scenes

"If you're clear that you won't be using the drones for surveillance, and you're proactive in your approach, you're more likely to have a positive public reception," she said. "Nobody is going to say no to a drone helping to find a missing child or track down a terrorism suspect."

The success of this approach was proven, as Elgin's drone program was met with near-unanimous positivity from the public. It's a testament to the trust Elgin PD has built with their community. The public at large trusted their law enforcement leadership to do what was in the community's best interest.

Commander Lalley exhorted police leadership to be sympathetic to the concerns of the public, and remain open to their suggestions and questions.

Takeaways:

- Use a platform like PowerDMS to survey your agency and anonymously gather their feedback on a drone program.
- Create a comprehensive list of what you plan to use the drone for.
- Hold a public forum, both in person and online, to answer questions and address objections from the public.

2. Do Your Homework

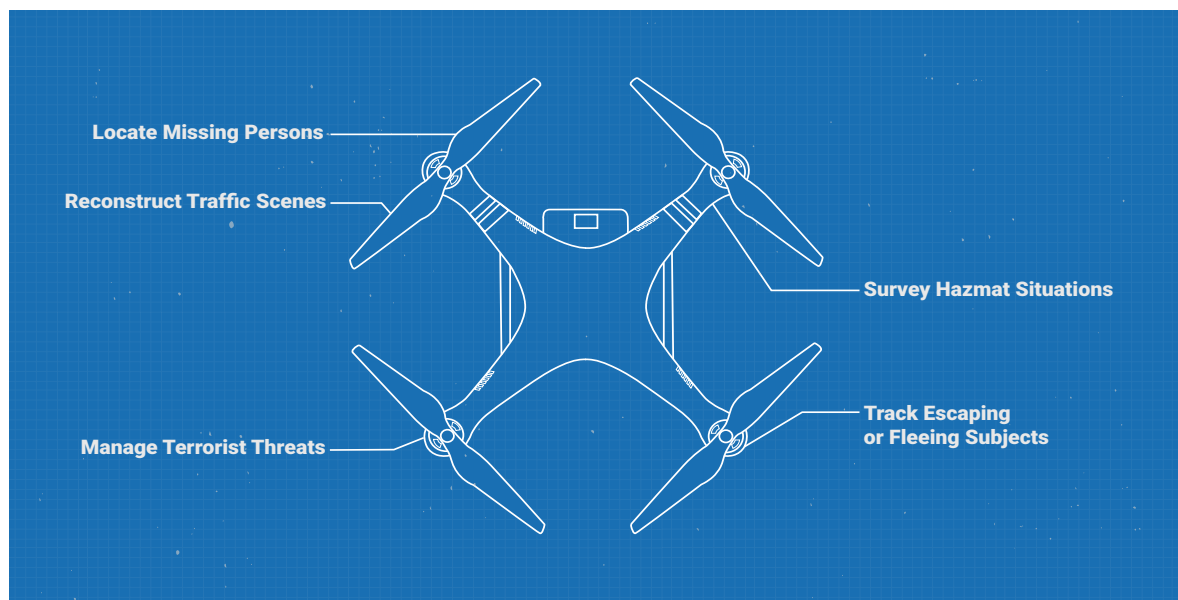
It's important to investigate laws and ordinances in your area that govern the usage of drones. While FAA regulations address issues of airspace, things like surveillance and drone-free zones are usually mandated by federal, state, and local laws.

Federal laws

"The FAA sees no distinction between a 747 aircraft and a drone," said Officer Snow, a licensed pilot and champion of Elgin PD's drone program. He went on to explain how hobbyist drone flyers aren't under near as much scrutiny for their drone flight as commercial pilots. A police department would fall into the commercial category and/or section 333 exemption.

Illinois' Freedom from Drone Surveillance Act means that Elgin PD has to be meticulous in their drone policy, training, and implementation. Officer Snow also explained the two primary ways law enforcement can legally fly a drone in the national airspace: **Section 333 exemption and/or Part 107 license**. [This article](#) helps break down the differences and can help you conclude which regulation is right for your agency.

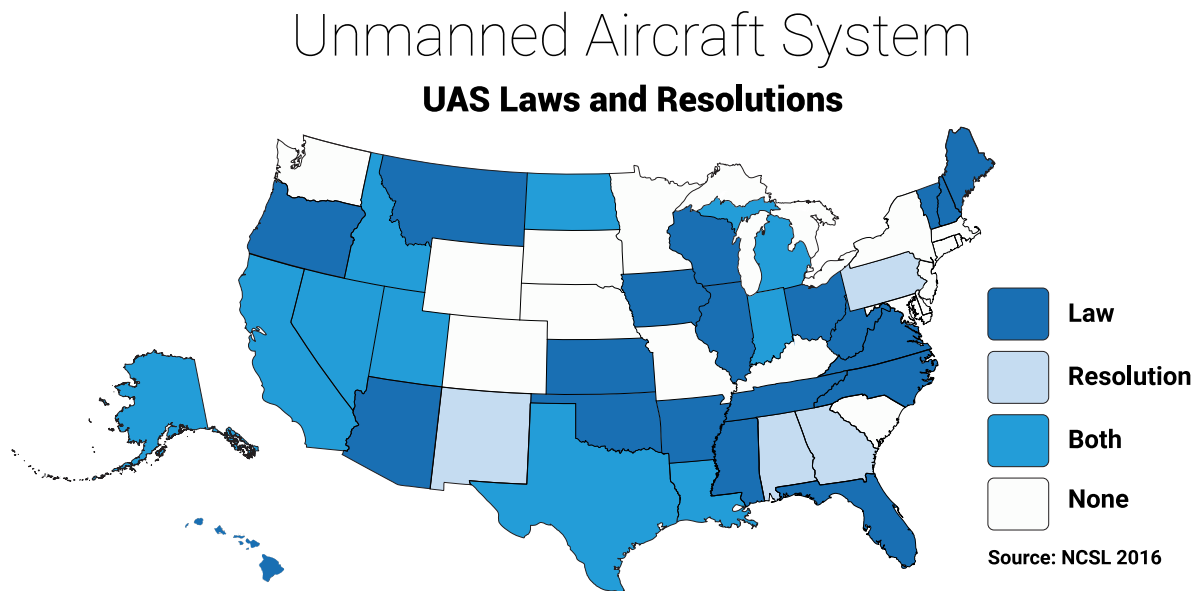
Officer Snow did mention that Elgin PD went the route of the Part 107 license. Some due diligence and study of the FAA website should help you understand which of these is right for your agency.



Local laws

As mentioned previously, Elgin PD (and all police departments in Illinois) are bound by the Freedom from Drone Surveillance Act and therefore must reflect these regulations in their policies and procedures.

[This site](#) is a helpful starting point for understanding your state's drone laws.



Takeaways:

- Research which FAA permit is right for your agency and begin the licensing process.
- Do a thorough examination of your [state laws](#) and make sure your policies reflect those requirements.

3. Take Your Time With Policies and Procedures

Policies and procedures are the roadmap for your agency's drone program. Commander Lalley said it's important to establish policies before implementing drones.

"A lot of agencies put out a drone program without a policy in place," she said. "In my opinion, they're setting themselves up for failure." Once you've done your research and gotten buy-in from your community, you'll need a set of policies and procedures that conform to your state's drone laws and federal airspace regulations as well as cover all planned uses for the drones.

There are two aspects of policy and training to consider. One is the actual usage of the drone. How will you train your troops to actually pilot and utilize the technology? The other is the regulatory side of things. Do your officers fully understand where they can and cannot fly in accordance with your state's local laws?

With laws like the Freedom from Drone Surveillance Act, Elgin PD can't afford to take any chances on officers acting contrary to their procedures. Commander Lalley emphasized how easy it is to [disseminate training materials through PowerDMS](#) with a few mouse clicks.

PowerDMS also makes it easy to track policy sign-offs and create quizzes to ensure officers have read and understood policies and can retain that information in the field. You can tie quizzes to policies so that they can only be signed when the employee passes. It would behoove your agency to build drone policies and training programs out well in advance of your drone program's launch date. This will give your staff ample time to familiarize themselves with the drones and how to follow regulations.

Takeaways:

- Draft policies that reflect local and federal laws and drone operational guidelines.
- Create supplemental training materials to ensure employee understanding.
- Disseminate these tools to your staff and test their retention with a policy management platform like [PowerDMS](#).

4. Creative Suggestions for Acquiring a Drone

Drones can range anywhere from hundreds of dollars to thousands of dollars. Depending on functionality and quality, a drone purchase can be an expensive decision for agencies that are likely already experiencing budgetary constraints. Commander Lalley suggested a few creative ways to acquire drone hardware.



Partner with your fire department or city

Due to their thriving relationship with the fire department, Elgin PD shares their drone and thus didn't have to shoulder the financial burden of the initial drone purchase. Not only is this cooperation financially beneficial, but helpful in the field as well.

They can use drones to recreate traffic scenes, locate missing persons, appraise and survey property, and contain hazmat situations. Accomplishing these tasks quickly with the help of aerial technology serves the community and keeps both law enforcement and the fire department happy.

Petition city council

Commander Lalley cited the enormous amount of resources that go into locating a missing person. Everything from man-hours to search parties can cost the department lots of money. She predicts that using drones to locate missing persons will save the department innumerable resources. Most importantly, it will help locate the victim faster. How could a drone save your department resources and provide a safer community? Before you petition your city council for funds, crunch some numbers and detail exactly how the investment of a drone would pay dividends in the long run.

Apply for grants

There is also a myriad of grants available for new technologies like drones. [This site](#) is a good place to start.

Utilize drug asset forfeiture money

If drug asset forfeiture money is something your agency handles, putting it toward a drone program is a good way to move forward technologically without going into the red on your department's ledger.

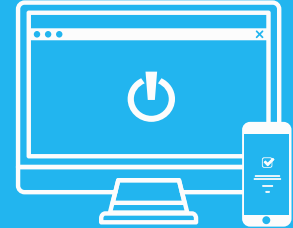
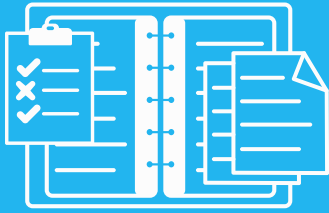
The Role of PowerDMS

Our conversation with the Elgin Police Department came right on the eve of them deploying their new drone training bulletin to officers. Commander Lalley praised PowerDMS as an essential part of their training regimen.

"PowerDMS makes it easy to disseminate these materials to all officers," she said. "We used it for our body-worn camera program, and we'll use it for drones as well. The fact that we have visibility into who has seen and signed our policies drives accountability as well, and that's the most important thing."

[Find out how PowerDMS can help your agency](#) as you implement a drone program.

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