

## Dayton Police Propose Drone Program to Respond To 911 Calls

**Police drone may respond to crime scenes, emergencies before Dayton officers under proposed program**

Privacy advocacy groups have concerns about police drone programs.

Local News

By Cornelius Frolik

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The Dayton Police Department has used drones in limited circumstances for years, but the agency for the first time ever wants to deploy a drone that may get to incident locations before officers and emergency crews arrive.

The police department's proposed Drone as First Responder program would deploy an unmanned aerial vehicle remotely as soon as a 911 call comes in, and the powerful camera on the drone can provide police with valuable information from the scene before cop cars and emergency vehicles can get there, said Dayton police Major Jason Hall.

"They don't have to worry about the stop sign. They don't have to worry about the traffic light. They don't have to worry about negotiating the streets," Hall said. "That coupled with some very, very good camera technology allows the drone to get eyes on a call extremely quickly — much quicker than an officer can."

Some law enforcement agencies say this technology is very helpful and effective and likely will be a big part of the future of policing.

But privacy and civil rights advocacy groups say drones can be used for surveillance in troubling ways, and without the proper guardrails government and law enforcement will have the capability to surveil people without reason or justification.

"It's irresponsible for local governments and state governments to be rolling out these types of technologies and using them with all kinds of privacy and surveillance ramifications with essentially no safeguards in place," said Gary Daniels, legislative director for the ACLU of Ohio. "Look if you are going to use drones or automatic license plate readers or any number of these other types of technologies with these kinds of ramifications, then at a minimum you need some local laws in place."



Police fly a drone in a security zone in downtown Dayton during the NATO Parliamentary Assembly in May 2025.

NICK GRAHAM/STAFF

## Drone program

Dayton recently was awarded [a \\$400,000 violent crime reduction grant](#) from the state of Ohio to help pay for a new gunshot detection system, more automated license plate readers, enhanced ballistics analysis and a Drone as First Responder program (DFR). More than a third of the state funding would pay for the DFR program (\$150,000). Police have been sharing information about the proposed use of these tools during community meetings, ahead of the department asking the city commission for authorization for their utilization.

A growing number of cities and police agencies across the nation are using drones to respond to 911 calls, including Cincinnati; New York City; Portland, Oregon; and Virginia Beach, Virginia.

Cincinnati says its autonomous drone program that launched in July gives police an overhead view of the scene before they arrive. The Cincinnati Police Department says this tool helps officers assess situations more accurately and respond more effectively.

The Chula Vista Police Department in California says its drones have responded to thousands of emergencies, reducing response times and providing real-time information to officers to help with decision-making. The agency says drones sometimes arrive at crime, fire and accident scenes minutes before officers and first-responders.

Dayton police Maj. Hall said the drone the police department is looking at acquiring can travel about 50 mph and flies at about 400 feet in the sky. He said the drones the police department already uses fly at about half that height.



Dayton police Major Jason Hall discusses a proposed Drone as First Responder program at a community meeting on Sept. 4, 2025. CORNELIUS FROLIK / STAFF

Under the proposed program, the drone would take off from a launch site in the city and would be piloted remotely by an officer in the police department's Real Time Crime Center. Potential launch sites include the downtown safety building and fire stations around the city.

Hall said a drone can help officers quickly get information from a crime scene or a crime in progress, like visuals of the suspects or getaway vehicles or an idea about the direction that suspects fled.

He said a drone can rapidly provide police and emergency crews with important details about traffic crashes, fires, water rescues and other critical incidents. Police said a drone will not handle any 911 call responses on its own and will just aid the officers and emergency crews who respond.

Hall said video from the drone may help police determine if calls for service are an actual emergency. For instance, he said, police get many calls about a "person down" but officers who respond often find that the subject was just sleeping or resting and already is up and moving around or has walked away.

"A lot of the calls that we go on ... we get there and find out that this wasn't quite the emergency we thought it was," he said.

Dayton police said the state grant would cover first-year costs of the drone program, and second-year costs would be about \$300,000.

### **Privacy concerns**

Daniels, with the ACLU of Ohio, said that cities that use drones and other police surveillance technologies need to create laws, regulations and internal policies about how drones can and cannot be used.

He said jurisdictions need rules about data collection to prevent information the drones have collected from being shared with agencies like U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) or the Department of Homeland Security.

"The civil liberties nightmare is where you're going to have automatic license plate readers and drones and everything else potentially synced up with each other, collecting all kinds of data all of the time, going into government databases," he said.



Dayton police asked people to shelter in place as officers, SWAT and hostage negotiation crews responded to an armed suspect at an apartment building in the 3600 block of Delphos Avenue on Monday, Aug. 25, 2025.

BRYANT BILLING / STAFF.

Daniels said some people act like the only community members who should fear police surveillance tools are the ones who have broken the law or have something to hide.

But he said the government should not be permitted to monitor and document, without cause, legal activities like going to protests, political events, mental health treatment centers, gun stores and houses of worship like churches and mosques.

"The justification needs to be on the government to explain why they have to do this and why they have to use this technology," he said. "Think about about how your worst political enemies — the people you don't like the most — can use this type of technology."

Dayton City Commissioners Darryl Fairchild and Shenise Turner-Sloss earlier this year publicly raised concerns about the privacy implications of new police surveillance tools and asked for evidence that they are beneficial and are worth the cost.

Dayton police have said that protecting community members' privacy is a priority and they have developed policies with that in mind.

### **Community meetings**

Sherri Crowell, vice president of the Linden Heights Neighborhood Council, attended a presentation about the DFR program and other proposed police tools on Thursday evening.

There are two more community meetings about the police department's plans at 5:30 p.m. Monday, Sept. 8 at the Dayton Metro Library Northwest Branch, and at 5:30 p.m. Wednesday, Sept. 10 at Dayton City Hall.

Crowell said she understands why people might be worried about their privacy, but she thinks a drone can help during emergencies by giving officers and responders a better idea of the situation more quickly.

"I'm actually kind of excited about it because we have a lot trouble in Dayton — we have a lot of crime, we have a lot of things going on," she said. "If a drone could get there quicker, it's bound to be a good thing."