San Francisco to Get First Medical Helipad in Decades

By Vic Lee

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SAN FRANCISCO (KGO) -- San Francisco may get its first helipad in decades.

UCSF Benioff Children's Hospital at Mission Bay flight tested its medevac helicopters with simulated drills on Wednesday.

The first clinical test flight of UCSF's medevac helicopter went well. The chopper performed a series of takeoffs and landings, testing three different flight paths.

When it landed atop of UCSF Mission Bay's main building, pediatric staff unloaded a doll dressed up like a critically ill newborn onto a gurney. In real life, a pediatric neonatal nurse will travel in the helicopter, treating the child or pregnant mother as soon as they leave the referring hospital.

And when UCSF gets a call, the choppers will be able to take off from its base in Oakland within 15 minutes.

"They're very critically ill, so time is really of the essence when a referring hospital calls and needs to have our services," said Kim Scurr with UCSF Benioff Children's Hospital.

When UCSF Benioff Children's Hospital opens in February, this will be the only operational medical helipad in San Francisco. In fact, pilots say there have been no helipads in the city for at least two decades. San Francisco police stopped using its helicopters in the 1990's after two officers were killed when its chopper crashed.

Opposition by neighborhood groups to the increased noise levels has been a road block.

But without a hospital helipad, patients have had to be flown to SFO and other landing spots outside of the city and then transported by ambulance to hospitals in the city. UCSF got final approval to build its helipad from San Francisco supervisors six years ago.

As for noise, tests show the level would be comparable to that of street traffic and construction.

If there are problems, UCSF says it will pay for soundproofing. "We send in a consultant that makes recommendations about soundproofing and we will pay for those sound proofing measurements for qualified homeowners," Cindy Lima, UCSF Mission Bay Project.