



SURVEILLANCE TECHNOLOGY WORKING GROUP

April 12th, 2024

RECOMMENDATION FOR QUALIFIED APPROVAL

S.T. No. 25-01 “Drones as First Responder”

Mayor Ben Walsh
City of Syracuse
City Hall Room 203
233 East Washington Street
Syracuse, New York 13202-1473

RE: *Surveillance Technology Working Group*
S.T. No. 25-01
Summary Report and Recommendation

Dear Mayor Walsh:

In accordance with Executive Order No. 2 issued on December 1, 2020, authorizing a Surveillance Technology Working Group (“STWG”) to comprehensively evaluate surveillance technologies proposed for implementation by various City of Syracuse departments, and to seek out and consider related public input, STWG has completed its review of *S.T. No. 25-01 “Drones as First Responder program”* as proposed for implementation by the Syracuse Police Department and hereby recommends **QUALIFIED APPROVAL** of *S.T. No. 25-01 “Drones as First Responder”* based on the reasons and considerations as summarized within this Report and Recommendation:

S.T. NO. 25-01 “Drones as First Responder” **SUMMARY DESCRIPTION**

“Drones as First Responder program” is a form of surveillance that leverages unmanned aerial vehicles (drones) equipped with audio and video-recording capabilities, as a tool to be deployed, if appropriate, when responding to 911 calls and other service calls. The aim of this program is to give police officers more information so they can adequately assess how to respond to calls, in order to increase efficiency and improve the safety of officers. It should be noted that this is not the first instance of drone utilization within the Syracuse City government, as has been documented previously by this working group, but it does constitute a new initiative that systematizes the use of drones for responding to emergency and service calls, modelled after similar programs in other cities.



SURVEILLANCE TECHNOLOGY WORKING GROUP

It should also be noted that SPD maintains policies around the general use of drones by officers and is in the process of developing a specific policy for this program.

STWG FINDINGS

Deputy Chief Shoff from the Syracuse Police Department answered detailed questions from STWG members with regards to transparency and disclosure of flight information as well as physical restrictions on flight paths. Additionally, Sgt. Wells provided a live demonstration of the system where the group was able to see the platform that would be used in this program.

In accordance with the STWG policy, the STWG sought input from Syracuse residents and local stakeholders. We received 141 entries through our online form. Roughly 67% of those were against the use of the technology, a few of which highlighted concerns about abuse and possible mission-creep in the future. Several members of the public also made the point that citizens expect people, and not robots, to show up when calling the police. Roughly 21% were supportive to the technology, with some of the comments highlighting that the community would benefit from faster response times and more efficiency in the police department.

The rest of the responses were neutral comments or questions, with several of them raising questions about the policies that would govern this program.

The STWG considered the public commentary in reaching its conclusion on SPD's 'Drones as First Responder program' for implementation. The group recognizes that while the use case proposed by SPD has merit, there are genuine privacy concerns from Syracuse residents, as well as advocacy groups, when it comes to the use of drones for public safety purposes. As is the case with similar technologies reviewed in the past, the group reached the decision that this program should only be put in place with a strong framework to protect privacy, which we cover in the stipulations section of this document.



SURVEILLANCE TECHNOLOGY WORKING GROUP

The STWG voted for a **QUALIFIED APPROVAL** of *S.T. No. 25-01* at its March 11, 2025 regularly scheduled meeting as follows:

STWG Member	Vote In Favor	In Favor w/ Stipulations	Vote Against	Abstention	Absence
Nicolas Diaz, API		X			
Chief Tim Gleeson, SFD					X
Martha Grabowski		X			
Johannes Himmelreich		X			
Mark King				X	
Sharon Owens, Deputy Mayor					X
Jawwaad Rasheed, SPD	X				
Jason Thomas, API				X	
Daniel Schwarz			X		
Michelle Sczpanski, NBD		X			
1st DC Richard Shoff, SPD		X			
Jennifer Tifft, Strategic Initiatives		X			
Valerie Didamo, Law Department		X			
Bradford Morse	X				



SURVEILLANCE TECHNOLOGY WORKING GROUP

STIPULATIONS AND/OR RECOMMENDATIONS FOR IMPLEMENTATION

To mitigate any potential risk of misuse of the technology under review, the STWG recommends implementing a policy to govern the program that includes (but is not limited to) the following measures:

1. Transparency and disclosure

- a. The police department should maintain a database of public access that provides citizens with information about where drones are being deployed, the purpose of deployment, and its estimated flight duration.

2. Accountability and reporting

- a. The police department should provide regular reporting on metrics tied to the program. Some of the relevant metrics include total number of flights, distribution by call type, geographic distribution of flights, response time analysis, number of complaints, policy violations.
- b. The platform used to manage the program should keep logs of both the flights and the individuals who access the system, which can be audited if necessary.

3. Public communication and outreach

- a. In order to address mistrust and perception of abuse by Syracuse residents, the police department should engage the public through public outreach and education campaigns. This should include both online and in-person activities. We heavily encourage the department to establish a channel (or add specificity to existing channels) for residents to be able to voice concerns or suspected policy violations.

4. Mission focus

- a. Given the modular nature of drones (the ability to add or combine other tools and technologies), the police department should not meaningfully alter the drones with new capabilities (i.e, through the addition of thermal imaging, biometric, facial recognition, LiDAR, water flow, acoustic and/or chemical sensors) unless reviewed again through the surveillance technology process.
- b. It is understood that this program is exclusively to respond to emergency and service calls and shall never be used for general surveillance or routine patrols.
- c. It is prohibited that drones are used to monitor protests, demonstrations, or other political activities protected under the First Amendment of the Constitution of the United States.



SURVEILLANCE TECHNOLOGY WORKING GROUP

SUPPORTING DOCUMENTATION

Affixed hereto is the public commentary feedback sought and received by STWG, as reviewed and considered in recommending *S.T. No. 25-01* with provisions. Also affixed are SWTG's meeting slides containing relevant notes and discussion points relative to *S.T. No. 25-01*.

CONCLUSION

Based on the aforementioned considerations, SWTG RECOMMENDS *S.T. No. 25-01* "*Drones as First Responder program*" FOR **QUALIFIED APPROVAL**.

Respectfully,

Nicolas Diaz

Chair

Surveillance Technology Working Group