



Drone First Responder Program

June 1st, 2026

Columbia Heights City Council,

We are writing to you regarding the proposed implementation of a Drone First Responder (DFR) program to offer some considerations.

1. Data Security and Data Privacy are paramount

Columbia Heights must ensure that all data collected and managed by DFRs is retained solely by the City and only shared with those law enforcement agencies that agree contractually to abide by the Minnesota Government Data Practices Act (MGDPA). What Minnesota experienced during Metro Surge was less an increase in surveillance than an unveiling and weaponization of an existing surveillance apparatus by the federal government.

Columbia Heights should anticipate that once this data is shared outside the confines of its own system that it will end up in the data surveillance network of the federal government – either through third-party vendors, collaborating in-state and out-of-state law enforcement agencies, fusion centers or other joint task forces.

2. The MGDPA is the floor for data protection, not the ceiling

Columbia Heights should provide clarity on when and where DFRs will be deployed. Several of the proposed uses we've seen in these programs exceed the authority delegated by the state including "verifying occupancy", "nuisance abatement," "illegal auto repair," and "traffic control."¹[OBJ]

Columbia Heights should ensure that the systems are regularly, independently audited and that the results of those audits made public

3. The history and ubiquity of surveillance in minority communities should be addressed by holding public awareness campaigns and gathering community feedback before, during, and after implementation of the program.

The history of surveillance is the history of minority repression. From Lantern Laws requiring minority individuals to carry a lantern unless "escorted" by a white person, to the deployment of ShotSpotter in majority-minority communities, to the surveillance of Black Lives Matter, state surveillance has a consistent throughline – the monitoring and repression of minority communities.

Prior to deploying additional surveillance in Columbia Heights's most diverse neighborhoods, the City should ensure that the residents are aware of and comfortable with the use of DFRs in their neighborhoods.

4. Drones are not a substitute for uniformed personnel.

¹ <https://www.revisor.mn.gov/statutes/cite/626.19>

The use of DFRs has come under increased scrutiny in the last year not just based on privacy concerns but also because their deployment has been ineffective at achieving the program's stated goals. For example, reliance on the technology delayed attending to a shooting victim by over 30 minutes and ultimately did not assist law enforcement agents in promptly determining the location of the suspect in the case in June 2025.²

Our experiences as a State during Operation Metro Surge demonstrate the grave constitutional concerns posed by community surveillance. It is important to have extensive public engagement and clarity on where and how the DFRs will be used, particularly within a community that recently experienced the fullest domestic implementation of the federal governments' surveillance arsenal.

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² <https://www.cbsnews.com/minnesota/news/minnesota-lawmaker-shootings-new-details-911-log/>