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Giving Back: The Valuable Work of Volunteer Pilots

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On a clear Monday morning, Angelica watches ahead from her seat as the small airplane lifts from the runway in Tampa, Florida and turns toward Miami. She is quiet and pensive during the flight.

In Miami she has a date with a doctor who specializes in her rare form of cancer. If not for the little airplane, he would be out of reach. She cannot afford a plane ticket, perhaps not even a bus ticket. The little airplane is the only way. It is her lifeline.

On arrival, the pilot will likely drive her to the hospital. He may wait until her appointment is over and then fly her back to Tampa and see that she has transportation home.

For all of this Angelica pays nothing. The pilot pays for everything. He does it with a smile and gains the priceless satisfaction of giving back. He is a volunteer pilot.

Angelica's scenario is repeated day in and out, bereft of fanfare, across the United States. Thousands of times a day, general aviation pilots volunteer their airplanes, skills and time for worthy missions such as hers.

Medical and compassionate missions

Medical missions are matched by compassionate missions. Volunteer pilots increasingly fly troop support missions for soldiers home on leave. In one case, a soldier made it back to the States from Iraq, but had no way to get home and back before his leave ran out. Volunteer organization Air Charity Network stepped in provided the last critical link. In another case, volunteer pilots periodically fly church volunteers to the Bahamas so they can help build a youth center there.

When time is of the essence, volunteers fly critical organs for transplant at any time of day or night on virtually no notice. After Hurricane Katrina, thousands of general aviation pilots flew relief workers and supplies into hard-hit New Orleans, landing at small airports because the main airport was flooded. Similar scenarios played out after 9/11 and Hurricane Andrew.

Volunteer pilot organizations

Matching pilots with passengers calls for organization, and hence the term 'volunteer pilot organization,' or VPO. (In aviation, there's an acronym for everything).

The largest and best-known VPO is the national Air Charity Network (ACN), formerly known as Angel Flight America. Over 90 percent of the public-benefit flying performed by pilots in private aircraft is done through ACN.

Air Charity Network consists of more than 8,000 pilots. In 2007, ACN flew more than 30,000 missions, the equivalent of one every 24 minutes for an entire year.

Local VPOs also exist. Your general aviation airport may host one or more. Ask around and check the bulletin boards. Volunteer groups such as the local Rotary or Shriners organizations may also know, as might local health care workers, especially social workers.

Another VPO option is the Corporate Angel Network (CAN). This organization's volunteers arrange free travel on corporate jets for cancer patients, bone marrow donors and bone marrow recipients, as long as they travel to or from a recognized cancer treatment center. CAN has no financial-need qualification.

Mercy Medical Airlift coordinates a dozen or so programs to help patients get to and from treatment. Its National Patient Travel Center is a "one-stop source of referral to the full spectrum of charitable long-distance air transport options." These include VPOs, charity-donated airline tickets (as through donated frequent flyer miles) and discounted air ambulance service.

Qualifying for a flight

Individual VPOs have their own criteria for qualifying eligible passengers, but the guidelines below are typical. For specifics, call and ask!

- Adult passengers must have some mobility.
- Aircraft are not air ambulances; pilots are not medically trained. Patients must be medically stable and cleared by their doctors to fly.
- Each child passenger must usually fly with an adult.
- Advance notice is needed.
- Pilots may need to cancel a flight. A back-up plan is essential.
- Patients may be asked to demonstrate financial need.
- Justification for a medical flight may be based on the need to travel to a specialist.
- Accompanying a patient who fits the above criteria is usually fine.
- A non-medical, compelling need to travel such as a family crisis or community disaster may qualify. This type of mission is called a "compassionate" mission.

An uplifting experience

On the lighter side, Challenge Air for Kids and Friends is a unique program that encourages challenged kids to reach beyond their perceived limitations. As front seat passengers in an airplane, they get to be in the air and to fly the airplane as well, in what can be a life-changing experience.

Calling volunteer pilots

Volunteer pilots are fully qualified and properly licensed. Each must hold at least an FAA private pilot certificate with typically 250 hours' experience, along with a medical certificate plus currency. If you are a pilot interested in volunteering, contact any of the organizations in this article for more details. Patients like Angelica are depending on us.

Fred Simonds is a member pilot of the Mercy Flight Southeast volunteer pilot organization.

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