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Limerick Living

Angel Flight East The Wings of Medical Need Met by Volunteer Pilots

Cover Photo by Kailey Edwards Photography

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Angel Flight East

The Wings of Medical Need Met by Volunteer Pilots

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Joining this part of the United States in 1992, Angel Flight East serves Pennsylvania, Ohio, Virginia, West Virginia, Maryland, Delaware, New Jersey, New York, Connecticut, Rhode Island, Massachusetts, New Hampshire, Vermont, and Maine, with a handful of its volunteer pilots sometimes going beyond this territory range. The nonprofit's volunteer pilots provide their time and skills at no cost and offer free air transportation for kids and adults with medical conditions needing advising and treatment at hospitals and other medical facilities far from where they live.

Angel Flight East is based at the airport along Narcissa Road in Blue Bell in Whitpain Township, but 20 of its volunteer pilots are based at the airport in Limerick Township along Ridge Pike; they generally use their own personal planes in the flights offered.



Jess Ames, Outreach and Events Director for Angel Flight East, explains, "Our umbrella organization is the Air Care Alliance, a resource for all public benefit flying organizations. Our flight territory was determined when Angel Flight East was founded. There are more than 60 organizations like Angel Flight East across the country. Although many of us use the name 'Angel Flight,' we operate as our own entity and partner to fly patients farther



distances. Most of our patients find us primarily online. We also connect with hospitals, specifically social workers, to raise awareness about Angel Flight East and to increase referrals from that avenue. Over the past four years, we have really focused on reaching out to community hospitals in rural areas since they already have a pretty large barrier to healthcare. A part of the paperwork package that patients are required to fill out before a flight can be scheduled is a Need Verification Form. This is filled out by a third-party, attesting to the fact it would be a hardship for the patient to travel by themselves. We do not put in any financial restrictions around flights—mainly because we take into account that a person may be able to afford to travel a couple of times, but ongoing treatment can become extremely costly pretty quickly. Other expenses, like hotel stays, food, household bills, etc. can put financial stress on a person as is. When doing an intake, our first two questions are 1) is the person medically stable, and 2) is the person ambulatory, meaning being able to walk on their own, without any assistance? Once we determine those two answers, we will then make sure their flight path is within our capabilities. We can determine if we will be able to help during the initial phone call, and we typically ask for five-to-seven days of notice for all flight requests. We have worked on much shorter time frames, but the window of time noted here gives us a bigger chance of finding a pilot. And there is a variety of conditions we fly for, including cancer, rare diseases, burns, clini-

Words can't describe how grateful we are for your generosity! Thank you so much for helping us travel safely with our son, Jack, to Lurie Children's Hospital! Jack is one year old and was born with an extremely rare genetic condition (Haddad Syndrome) that only 100 people have globally. Jack spent the first 7 months of his life in the NICU and we have been able to continue his care and treatment at Lurie Children's and Boston Children's Hospitals. This wouldn't be possible without your incredible kindness and willingness to help! Thank you from the bottom of our hearts and God bless you!

cal trials, etc. One little girl, Kara, pulled on the cord of a crockpot and suffered severe burns on all of her body. We helped to fly her from Virginia to Shriners Hospital for Children in Cincinnati, Ohio."

Volunteer pilot John Solt of the Spring Mount area, with around 30 flights provided since 2017 says, "My neighbor across the street is a member, and he told me about Angel Flight East. He encouraged me to become a member, too, and volunteered to accompany me on my first flight nearly six years ago."

John and his wife, Faith, have a background in being a part of

the nonprofit Flying Mission Zambia based in both Zambia and Botswana in Africa, handling missionary-based flights.

"Most of the flights we complete are about 300-400 nautical miles to get the patient somewhere for treatment, and that usually is about one to one-and-a-half hours. Then we typically fly the same distance home. I recall that in October of 2021, I received a request to fly a one-year-old boy with a very rare genetic disorder, and the trip was to be completed in two legs; my leg was Washington, D.C. to Ohio, with the second flight from Ohio to Chicago. The boy required oxygen and a lot of support equipment and baggage. When the family found out that the trip was going to be two legs, they were concerned that everything would not fit in the second airplane and were going to cancel the flight and rent a van to drive to Chicago. My mission assistant and I made the decision to fly the family nonstop to Chicago. By the time we got home, we had flown over 1,200 nautical miles. This was very unusual, but we were glad to be able to help out this family, and they were extremely grateful. Typical insurance does not cover transportation for treatment or doctors' visits. The families we help are already facing challenging financial pressures. Assisting them, by providing free transportation, is one way we can help to minimize some of the stress they are facing."



PHOTOS COURTESY OF JOHN SOLT

Another volunteer pilot, Gregory Vallino, is an optometrist based in the Kimberton area of Chester County and resides in Schuylkill Township, often working in outreach to help spread awareness about Angel Flight East.

He shares, "I have done podcasts with Jess, YMCA events, public school presentations, talks during Kindness Week, and have even taken three Phoenixville area students on an Angel Flight East mission as part of their senior year project. With what we do, the mindset of the pilot is we spend days prior planning the flight, looking at the

weather, calling the person who requires the flight, connecting with them several times, and then there is the actual flight of pickup and return. When the mission is done, it can be an exhausting day, but when you return home, you realize how lucky you and your family are. In reality, you are helping someone, but in return, they are truly helping you. I have received letters, cards, and even cookies at the office as a thank you. And I have met many great pilots just by asking if they would like a copilot, AKA a mission assistant."



Fun Flying Facts

The Federal Aviation Administration's Identifiers

Airport in Blue Bell—**LOM**

Airport in Limerick—**PTW**

He adds, “On one past trip, I was able to bring someone from where I grew up in Syracuse, New York, to her treatment in Philadelphia. There was a bonus with this mission, that my sister was able to meet me at the airport, and she brought lunch for everyone, including the patient. The most memorable part of the mission was the poor weather and thunderstorms we had to divert. The final diversion was we landed in Limerick instead of Blue Bell as planned due to the thunderstorms. After landing, I told the patient, ‘No worries—I will drive you to your next destination so that you can get where you have to.’ The amazing part was a call I received from Angel Flight East shortly after landing, asking where I was. I stated where and explained the reasoning. Little did I know that they watch every mission of the pilots on specialized tracking software for everyone’s safety. The software listed my flight as landed, but they were looking all around the airport in Blue Bell to find us, and they were very concerned. WOW, I did not know Angel Flight East was our watchdog of the sky until then.”

Diana Huang lived in the Phoenixville area of Chester County with her son, Steven, 14, until they relocated to Central Pennsylvania. Steven has what's called Gaucher Disease Type 3, which she describes as a rare disease, and in his case, a subacute neurological form involving the whole body.

After researching online for transportation assistance, Diana found Angel Flight East and began scheduling flights in 2019 to the Lysosomal & Rare Disorders Research & Treatment Center in Fairfax, Virginia, for clinical treatment every two weeks.

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"It is a rare disease, therefore medical resources for it are limited," Diana says. "We focus on his treatment plans, drugs, and doctors' evaluations all the time. He has not only about 13 specialists involved between CHOP and duPont, but we've also taken medical trips to NIH and Yale Children's Hospital. These long and frequent travels leave us exhausted. Over time, our energy has been about coping with traveling time more than medical appointments. And I do appreciate Angel Flight East and all the staff and volunteer pilots! They spend their time supporting us, as needed. With their great help, it makes our medical trips better mitigated to save time on traffic, with us even having fun while in flight. We especially thank Jess who is like a patient coordinator. She helps us with how to request flights, noting all the details, and has even booked us taxis between airports and medical facilities. Her passion for her work to help us is unforgettable."

Ryan and Megan Roche live not far from Dayton, Ohio. Ryan is recently very gratefully in remission for Stage 4 Metastatic Prostate Cancer, at age 34.

"The Mayo Clinic in Rochester, Minnesota is where my doctor is located," Ryan says. "I travel there every three months. I went to St. Paul, Minnesota for treatments every three weeks. For my flights, Megan's aunt told us about Angel Flight East. Her brother-in-law used to be a volunteer pilot.

First taking these flights in autumn of 2021, Ryan notes, "Each trip took four total pilots, as it would take one to go to the Chicago area from Ohio, and then another flight to Minnesota.



We had some pilots we became really close to, as they took us a couple of times—we even had the surgeon who placed my infusion port, Dr. Patrick Larreategui, take us on a flight, pictured with us here. But getting to know each pilot and learning about their families ranks right up there, meaningfully, for Megan and me; I'm so thankful and appreciative to have them donate their time, with each trip being so memorable. I was able to get to this point of remission because of their sacrifices! Dr. Eugene Kwon at the Mayo Clinic has been a leader in the space of prostate cancer, and these pilots have contributed to my remission by getting me to Minnesota. Each pilot takes pride in their commitments and makes each trip feel very safe, and enjoyable, and got me through some of the harder moments after chemo."



PHOTO COURTESY OF MEGAN ROCHE

Megan mentions, "Angel Flight East has been so easy to work with and so accommodating of our situation! We have three kids under the age of five, and being away isn't easy. One time, there was a snowstorm, and we thought we were going to get caught in Minnesota for a couple of days. Jess was in constant communication with us and she reworked the schedule to get us home before it hit. We owe so much to this organization, as the care we need was in Minnesota. Angel Flight East is lifesaving care."

To find out more, visit www.angelflightheast.org.

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