

Angel Flight Southeast

By Karen McBride

Angel Flight Southeast helps people in need of medical services get to the hospitals for treatment. FAA certified pilots volunteer their time and aircrafts to transport people in need to get to their treatment whether it is for chemotherapy, dialysis, organ transplant, or other medical need. Angel Flight is part of the Air Charity Network and is known as Mercy Flight in Louisiana, Alabama, Mississippi, Georgia and South Carolina. The organization has been around for 27 years.

Steve Purrello, CEO and Chairman of Angel Flight Southeast, had been an Angel Flight Northeast pilot for more than six years before moving to Florida. He had learned about it from a brochure left at one of the airports he would frequent. He was pleased to find out there was an Angel Flight Southeast, so that he could continue with his volunteer work. "It makes you feel good to help someone in need," says Purrello.

Airports all over Florida are used. Tampa Executive is the primary airport in our area. Recently, a military veteran, who had vision problems, was flown from Tampa to a VA hospital in West Palm for treatment. In addition to medical assistance, classes are held at the facility to teach sight impaired veterans how

to live in a sightless world. Last month, Angel Flight SE volunteers were at Peter O. Knight airport. An infant needed to be transported to a hospital in Miami for a liver transplant. Another patient with a severe blood disorder was flown from Dustin to All Children's hospital.

Pilots with 250 PIC hours are encouraged to apply to be a volunteer. In addition to helping people get to their medical appointments, Angel Flight SE helps during times of disaster. Working under a special agreement with the U.S. government and the Corporation for National and Community Service, Angel Flight pilots completed hundreds of missions after 9/11, and hurricanes Katrina and Andrew. The missions included transporting personnel and small cargo. Thirty seven trips have been made to the Bahamas, transporting volunteers to aid Bahamas Habitat, an organization that provides housing to people in need.

The Tampa Bay Area Wing holds its monthly meeting at The Hangar Restaurant, Albert Whitted Airport, 540 1st Street SE, in St. Petersburg, FL (KSPG) on the third Wednesday of every month from 6:30 pm-8:30 pm. In November Bill Shivers held a program on Upset Recognition and Recovery and discussed reinvigorating the Tampa Bay Area Wing. Mr. Shivers

can be reached at 727-385-9942 or via email: wnshivers@aol.com .

In addition to pilots, ground volunteers, called Earth Angels, are vital to the success of this organization. Driving patients to/ from the airport (or hospital) are among their many responsibilities. Contacting hospitals to send out brochures, coordinating missions and making presentations at meetings to let people know what they are doing and to encourage

volunteers to join them in their efforts are key to the continued success of this special organization.

Tampa Wing Leader, Bill Shivers has been a volunteer pilot for the past 6 years. "Volunteers are so important to the success of the missions. We can't help if caregivers don't know about Angel Flight," says Shivers. Patients learn about Angel Flight Southeast through the hospital's social workers. In order to qualify for the free air



Left to Right.....John Epley (pilot), Jeb Bolivar (patient) and Jack Culley (pilot)....in front of Marianna FBO. Marianna was a WWII Army Air Corps training base. Jack Culley wrote to John Epley re: mission "Great to meet you at Marianna yesterday. Jeb Bolivar's condition makes us realize how lucky we are to have good health. Uncomplaining and enthusiastic passenger."

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transport, patients must show that the distance to the medical facility is too far to drive, and show a financial need to eliminate the ability to take a commercial flight. Patients must be able to sit upright during the flight. "Another major benefit from using Angel Flight is that patients can have oxygen tanks, and you can't have them on commercial flights", said Shivers. Families receiving help from Ronald McDonald charities or Shriners Hospital are also eligible.

This organization is funded by donations and a vast majority of those donations are from the pilots themselves. These men and women not only volunteer their time, but donate the use of their airplanes, including fuel. For every \$1 donated, they give \$5 in services, which is unlike other organizations, where it is usually pennies on the dollar. Unfortunately, this program is not funded by the government, so donations are needed to keep this organization going.

People can go online to www.mercymiles.org and donate to a specific mission. Missions scheduled over the next 90 days. Choose a mission and the number of miles and donate \$1 per mile. On the day of the flight, you can see the mission in real time (when the plane takes off and when it lands).

Fund raising events are held, such as the Texas Hold'em tournament that was held in November. This professional poker style tournament was very successful. Tickets were \$60 which included \$40 in player's chips. Another card playing event and a golf tournament are in the planning stages to be held in the Tampa area. At the time of this publication, the venues had not been confirmed, so be sure to check the website for details.

Most missions come from the facilitators at the hospitals, American Cancer Society, American Heart Association, Make-A-Wish

Foundation, Alisa Ann Ruch Burn Foundation. Referrals are received from Corporate Angel Network and AirLifeLine. Flights must be scheduled 5 working days in advance. Emergency flights may be scheduled with less than 5 days for transplant recipients, but must be made by the Transplant Coordinator.

Patients in need of medical care are not the only ones who need Angel Flight Southeast. Victims of abuse have used their services to relocate. Angel Flight Southeast has over 650 volunteer pilots that have clocked over 1,500 missions per year. Whether you are in need of transportation to get medical assistance, help during a disaster, or need volunteers to build homes for the less fortunate, it is good to know there truly are angels on earth, and in the sky.

For more information, go to www.angelflightse.org or call 800-352-4256.

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