

Angel Flight – An Interview with Marita Eddy by Edward Becker, Director, PAN Support Network

Marita Eddy is the travel coordinator for Angel Flight, a non-profit organization that helps to ensure that needy patients can travel to long distance medical appointments. Flights are arranged either through pilots using their own planes, or on a commercial aircraft. In the following interview, Marita shares some of the background of this organization; its mission and challenges to meet the critical transportation needs of patients and families.

Note: If you have any questions about Angel Flight please direct them to Marita Eddy at: meddy@mail.nih.gov

1. Marita, in a paragraph or two, tell us the mission of Angel Flight. What service does it provide? How long has Angel Flight been in operation?

Born on a wing and a prayer more than 30 years ago, a group of general aviation pilots in the DC area bought a Beechcraft Bonanza 36, a six-seat, single-engine plane. Tail No. N7709R. The Washington Aviation Ministry (WAM), as it was called, was primarily an air taxi for prominent religious and humanitarian figures with an occasional patient mission. Over the years, the group grew and expanded into an air ambulance service transporting patients needing immediate care. In 1987, WAM became Mercy Medical Airlift (MMA). The name Angel Flight was used to describe the fast-growing number of patient missions flown using volunteer pilots in their airplanes for distances under 1,000 miles.

MMA created other services to ensure that no needy patient would be denied access to medical care for lack of air transportation. Programs included a call-referral service matching patient requests with resources and "Special Lift" programs for patients involved in clinical trials. MMA formed partnerships with commercial airline companies to donate tickets and frequent flyer miles for patients needing to travel more than 1,000 miles.

MMA joined with other volunteer pilot associations across the country to form Air Charity Network (ACN), which provides 90 percent of charitable air transportation in the United States. Every 24 minutes a child or adult in need is being flown through the generous volunteer and donor resources of these grass roots organizations.

2. Share some stats with us. How many patients have used Angel Flight last year? How many private pilots volunteer their services? How many flights were logged last year?

In FY 2010, Angel Flight Mid-Atlantic flew 1,166 missions and MMA Commercial Airline Programs provided more than 5,000 flights. MMA provided service for more than 22,000 clients.

During the previous 12 months - 1,539 missions have been completed for patients diagnosed with a rare disease. 926 of these missions were for patients participating in Clinical Trials. These missions were completed utilizing charitable airline resources through programs operated by Angel Flight at NIH and Mercy Medical Airlift. Public benefit of these missions exceeded \$460,000.

3. You mentioned a recent meeting that Angel Flight not only has private pilots assisting, but the organization also has connections with some major airlines. Tell us some more about how commercial airlines have provided services to the patients using AF. How is it decided whether a patient uses a private plane or flies on a commercial one?

In order to use our services, patients must have a financial need. We assume that families that can afford the cost of air transportation will use their own resources. However, we understand that when a family member has a chronic illness, the family may incur major medical expenses and may have to travel frequently and long distances for specialized medical evaluation and care. We also want to encourage patients to participate in clinical research studies, especially patients

with rare diseases. Scientists know so little about most rare conditions and the number of patients affected is so small that there is a great need for every patient to participate if possible. We want to help drive that research forward.

Patients must be ambulatory and capable of sitting upright during flight.

The decision as to whether to fly in small planes or on commercial flights is based on a number of factors. Short flights are usually quicker by general aviation. Also, patients who live in remote or rural areas have easier access to local and regional airfields. These patients often prefer flying with our private pilots. For patients who live farther than about 600-700 miles, I recommend commercial flights. However, these guidelines are flexible. We can consider other factors as well. We offer travel for a patient and one escort.

The biggest issue with commercial flights is the availability of resources. We work with airlines, foundations, other air transportation organizations. We match patients with the best resource. Different programs have different rules. Some programs are specifically for children. Others, just for cancer patients. Sometimes the need outweighs the available resource and we have to turn people down. That is hard for us to do. Fortunately, we continue to expand the number of programs and services we can offer.

We have a 12 relationship with US Airways. MMA exchanges donated frequent flyer miles for commercial airline tickets. MMA has a two-year relationship with the American Cancer Society (ACSA). Flyers can donate frequent flyer miles from United Airlines and Delta Airlines to the ACS. MMA can then exchange the donated miles for commercial airline tickets for cancer patients. MMA hopes to expand its relationship with Southwest Airlines. Southwest donates a limited number of tickets every January. Other programs help different categories of patients and a generous benefactor allows MMA to purchase tickets outright for patients who don't fall into any of the other categories.

4. How does AF determine if a patient is eligible for the service? Share a few of the guidelines that must be met to be eligible. Where can interested patients go to find out all of the requirements?

Go to Angel Flight at NIH, www.angelflightatnih.org

Patients need to be ambulatory, capable of walking and sitting upright. They require medical treatment, evaluation, rehabilitation or testing that is only available at a long-distance facility or be in a clinical research study. Their physician must complete a medical approval form so that we know the patient is medical stable to fly. They must have a financial need and no other way of reaching their destination.

5. How is AF funded/supported?

Angel Flight is supported by donations of services and money from individuals, corporations, foundations and trusts. Donors may contribute through workplace giving programs, such as the Combined Federal Campaign and the United Way. Angel Flight Mid-Atlantic has earned Best in America seal for non-profit management. MMA has earned the top four-star rating from Charity Navigator. Check out some of our partners.

6. What has been one of the more inspiring stories you know about how a trip on Angel Flight made a critical difference to a patient who needed the transport. (Just an anecdote about how your service made the difference in the health of a patient)

Angel Flight pilots flew a 20-year-old Usher Syndrome patient to Montgomery County Airpark in Gaithersburg, Maryland. A volunteer Earth Angel picked her up and drove her to the NIH Clinical Center in Bethesda. The patient is deaf and progressively losing her eyesight. The doctors from the National Eye Institute want to learn more about her condition. There is no treatment for Usher Syndrome, but she did get a cochlear implant and now has some hearing.

This person, her name is Heather, has taught me that patients are more than their medical conditions. Heather is a beautiful young woman. She's now a junior at Illinois State University with a major in social work. She flew from Illinois with her fiancé.

For more stories go to: <http://www.angelflightmidatlantic.org/category/stories/>

7. Tell us a bit about the pilots who volunteer their services? Are they mainly retired?

One of our pilots is the man who created MapQuest. When he sold MapQuest, he used some of the proceeds to buy a plane and learn how to fly. He donates some of his time as an Angel Flight pilot among his many other endeavors. Another pilot learns how to fly when he was 16. That was in 1945. Some of our pilots are retired. Many are former military. Some are executives who fly frequently on business. A few are doctors. We have women pilots too. They all love to fly.

8. Once on the ground at the airport, patients may need to have transportation to the hospital. You have a program called Earth Angels. Share some info about that program.

Patients who are coming to the NIH Clinical Center in Bethesda, Maryland, fly into Montgomery County Airpark in Gaithersburg, which is about 15 miles from the NIH campus. One of my fabulous "Earth Angels" will volunteer to drive to the airport, greet the patient and take him/her to NIH. These volunteers are people from the community who take time out of their day help out. It's a way of donating that doesn't take much of their time, but means a lot to the patients. Having someone smile and say, "I'm your Earth Angel" is a comforting thing to hear when you've been flying all day. Don't know where you are or how to get to where you need to be.

9. What are some of the ways a person can volunteer his/her time to AF? Obviously you need pilots, but what other types of jobs/positions are connected with your organization. How does someone let you know he or she wants to volunteer?

We love volunteers. They help in a variety of ways. Folks who are interested can go to Air Charity Network's [Member Organizations](#) page and contact one of the volunteer pilot organizations in their area.

10. Tell me more about how people can donate their extra air miles to the program. How does it work?

Yes! Send those unused miles to us. Go to <http://www.donatefrequentflyermiles.org/>. For US Airways, donate to Mercy Medical Airlift. For United Airlines and Delta Airlines, donate to the American Cancer Society. TIA

11. Typically how many other people can accompany the patient to the destination? Are there extra allowances for children who are the patients (both parents?).

For commercial tickets each patient may bring one escort. For general aviation flights, if the patient is a child, we may be able to include both parents depending on total weight and distance.

12. Have you encountered any medical conditions that are in conflict with flying? I mean a patient who has a disease that could be made worse by the conditions of flying? If so, how did you get around the issue?

This can sometimes be a challenge. I once had a patient who was over seven feet tall. Unfortunately we were not able to fly him in small plane. There is a weight limit on the general aviation aircraft of 250 pounds for an individual. We can fly patients who need oxygen. These patients do better in small planes than commercial aircraft. Elderly patients usually do better on commercial flights as they may have trouble climbing in and out of the private planes. I have had two different experiences with kids with autism. One child hated the noise of the small plane. For him, we recommended commercial flights. Another autism patient hated being in a crowded airport. However, he loved watching the prop on the small planes and did fine throughout the flights. We try to take each case individually.

Here are some important links for Angel Flight:

www.angelflightatnih.org – referrals come directly to me

<http://mercymedical.org> – information about all Mercy Medical Airlift programs

<http://patienttravel.org> – information about air transportation resources for patients

www.donatefrequentflyermiles.org – learn how to donate frequent flyer miles

www.angelflightmidatlantic.org - Angel Flight Mid-Atlantic provides medical air transport for patients departing from: District of Columbia, Delaware, Kentucky, Maryland, Michigan, Ohio, Pennsylvania, Virginia and West Virginia.

www.airlifthope.org - Airlift Hope provides medical air transport for patients departing from: North Carolina and Tennessee.