

Emergency Medical Response - Aviation in Action

Airports in Colorado Support Critical Missions

Airports and heliports serve as essential components of the emergency response system, especially in rural parts of Colorado. These landing facilities are used for critical care transport of patients to hospitals and for visiting doctors that see patients at local hospitals and medical clinics. Air transport is also used for tissue and organ transfers and for some laboratory tests as well as needed supplies and equipment. Many public agencies, private air ambulance companies, and air carriers such as FedEx and UPS are engaged in these critical medical air logistic operations that offer time-definite services.

The stories below highlight doctor visits to rural hospitals/clinics and the great importance of community airports during the COVID-19 pandemic for transport of much needed medical supplies, ventilators, sanitizer, and personal protective equipment (PPE).

Angel Flight West (AFW) Responds to COVID-19 Pandemic

A private plane takes off from Centennial Airport (APA) headed for Rangely Airport (4V0) with a medical ventilator for use by the Rangely District Hospital. Another aircraft takes off from Rocky Mountain Metropolitan Airport (BJC) carrying hand sanitizer for Wray Community District Hospital. The CEO of the hospital, John Hart, meets the plane and picks up the sanitizer. The pilot, Phil Rosnik, who has donated his time, the aircraft, and fuel to transport the medical supplies then returns to BJC.

Phil is not alone; 115 Colorado pilots are volunteering to deliver much needed ventilators, medical supplies, and PPEs throughout the state to rural hospitals. Behind the scenes, a large cadre of Colorado volunteers are performing countless good deeds. The Governor's office and the Colorado Hospital Association have organized an emergency medical supply distribution network to creatively address critical shortages. As part of the network, the Make4Covid Colorado community formed and is designing, manufacturing, and testing medical and protective equipment. Students at the University of Colorado Anschutz Medical School are picking up supplies and equipment, loading them into cars, and driving to airports where AFW pilots and aircraft are waiting to transport the supplies to communities throughout the state. During the peak of the pandemic, Angel Flight West's Colorado Wing flew medical supply missions to Limon, Holyoke, Wray, Alamosa, Cortez, Grand Junction, and Rangely within just a two-week timeframe. While it is more typical of AFW to fly approximately six missions per month in Colorado, there are many more requested missions for medical resupply during the pandemic. Local airports and the FBOs are supporting these missions, often waiving facility and ramp fees and discounting fuel prices.

AFW has existed since 1983 as a nonprofit, volunteer-driven, organization that arranges free, non-emergency air travel. Before COVID-19, AFW provided free air travel to children or adults with serious, but non-life threatening medical conditions or other compelling needs. The organization serves 13 states in the west. Over 1,400 pilots donate their aircraft and all flying costs to help families in need to receive medical treatments that might otherwise not be available because of financial, medical, or geographic limitations.¹ During the COVID-19 pandemic, AFW has redirected its missions to bringing critical medical supplies to rural hospitals throughout the west.



Photos courtesy of Angel Flight West

¹ www.angelflightwest.org

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Rural Partners in Medicine (RPM)

Today, 25 percent of Americans live in rural communities where most people rely on the local hospital as their principal source of medical care. According to the Rural Health Research Center, only 10 percent of physicians practice medicine in these areas, resulting in a chronic shortage of medical services.

RPM, based at BJC, has sought to address these shortages by sending specialty surgeons to rural hospitals in Colorado, Nebraska, Wyoming, Missouri, Kansas, Arizona, Nevada, and South Dakota.

When specialty physicians travel to rural hospitals, they are able to expand medical services that can be provided locally. This makes it possible to obtain elective surgeries in the community without having to travel to a major city. These services help to support the local economy and viability of small hospitals and medical clinics. RPM has partnered with 30 hospitals in the Mountain Region. In Colorado, they serve hospitals in Cortez, Holyoke, Hugo, Lamar, and Yuma on a weekly basis, using local airports to transport physicians in and out. Doctors are transported on regularly chartered aircraft out of BJC, APA, Colorado Air and Space Port (CFO), Northern Colorado Regional (FNL), and Yampa Valley Regional (HDN) airports. Different charter companies support RPM including Mountain Aviation, Mayo Aviation, Silverhawk, Raber Flight Services, and Choice Aviation. RPM charts approximately 55 flights per month and 145 hours of flight time per month. Colorado's general aviation airports are indispensable partners in RPM's ability to provide quality medical care to many rural communities.

Community Support of the Airport Matters – The Story of Del Norte's Airport

Del Norte is located in south central Colorado in a majestic area where the Rio Grande leaves the San Juan Mountains and enters the San Luis Valley. The area has a long and rich history of native, Mexican, and Euro-American settlements. Del Norte remains a vibrant community that serves the regional population. Like many other small towns, it lost its community hospital in 1993 after serving the San Luis Valley for over 85 years. It took over 10 years to rebuild and reopen the Rio Grande Hospital as a primary care and emergency facility to serve the region's medical needs.

One of the challenges that remained for the town was transport for critically ill patients needing to go to larger hospitals such as those in Alamosa or Pueblo. The runway at Astronaut Kent Rominger Field (RCV) was too short and narrow (3,775 feet by 49 feet) to handle a large and fast air ambulance aircraft. To address the need, the town planned for an airport expansion that would include a longer and wider runway to accommodate an air ambulance aircraft. Funding was an issue because the airport did not qualify for federal funds, but the community persisted and worked with CDOT Division of Aeronautics to obtain state grants with a county match. In 2010, Rio Grande County opened a new 6,000-foot-long runway with new lighting and a weather station. Subsequently, Eagle Air Med based an aircraft, a flight crew, and a medical crew on the airfield and today the community has rapid medical response capabilities that have already saved lives.



Photos courtesy of CDOT Aeronautics

Summary

Airports are integral parts of the medical and emergency response capability in Colorado. They serve as critical logistics centers for medical transport and bases for aerial search and rescue. When a natural disaster or emergency strikes, airports are indispensable for coordinated response and recovery. Airports in Colorado also make it possible to reach patients who need transport to larger hospitals or to bring physicians to rural hospitals where patients can receive specialty medical services right in their community. During the COVID-19 pandemic, community airports were used extensively to help resupply rural hospitals and clinics in critical need of ventilators, masks, and other PPE.