

Guest Column: The Human Impact of General Aviation

August 11, 2023



Over the winter, California saw record levels of flooding. Parts of the state received up to three feet of rain over the course of three weeks. Cumulative snowfall for the state has been nearly triple the normal levels.

In Northern California, the Ocean Ridge Airport recently transformed into a basecamp for Pacific Gas and Electric efforts to keep the power on in the surrounding areas, where 300 workers were encamped to respond to downed trees and powerlines, high winds, landslides, and other flood related issues.

And in Southern California, organizations such as the Emergency Volunteer Air Corps and CalDART (California Disaster Airlift Response Team) recently transported 21,000 pounds of supplies to the San Bernardino Mountains, where multiple communities were trapped by massive snow accumulation over a couple of weeks. During that time, roads were blocked, roofs were collapsing, multiple houses exploded associated with gas use, store shelves were bare, and some grocery stores were not even safe to enter, but the efforts of volunteer pilots helped to transport critical supplies to a hospital and other areas.

Flights for Life, an organization I volunteer for, is based in Arizona and works with hospitals, blood banks, and health-care agencies to transport human blood around the Southwest to replenish hospital reserves. Additionally, volunteer pilots throughout the country transport patients to distant medical care on a daily basis through a national network of charitable aviation organizations. According to the Air Care Alliance, last

year alone, more than 12,000 volunteer pilots in total across the country flew nearly 40,000 flights, totaling more than 4 million miles.

And, companies use these aircraft to safely transport tools and personnel, support jobs and serve their communities. In the U.S. alone, general aviation supports more than 1.1 million jobs and more than \$246 billion in economic impact annually.

The truth is that while all sectors of aviation are important, most people may not realize that the majority of commercial flight traffic goes through the largest 30 airports. That means that smaller airports and the private and smaller aircraft that rely on them are a literal lifeline to thousands of communities across the nation.

While it is easy to stereotype these aircraft through sensationalist rhetoric and Twitter accounts, this is a huge disservice to the businesses and individuals that use these aircraft.

And while these numbers are important, we also need to consider, for example, a six-year-old patient who was recently transported by an Angel Flight West pilot from Wyoming to Colorado for treatment of a rare but serious blood condition. Additionally, we need to consider the American Indian communities that depend on this network from organizations such as the Navajo Christmas Airlift, rescued animals and emergency and medical supplies that are transported via general aviation on an ongoing basis, among many others. This is the human impact of general aviation. As Congress considers FAA reauthorization and funding of our aviation system in the coming months, I urge our leaders to consider the benefits of charitable aviation to so many in need.

James Hesseman is the president of Air Care Alliance, a nonprofit public service organization representing a nationwide network of volunteer pilot groups that deliver impactful and inspiring service through aviation. ACA encourages volunteerism among pilots, helps patients access the free air transportation they need, and ensures that charitable aviation remains a viable resource to those who need it most.