

By HOUSTON CHRONICLE

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'Ground angels' needed to drive patients to hospitals

The road to recovery for many cancer patients begins with a flight to Houston provided by a network of volunteer pilots. The sponsoring agency is trying to build its corps of other volunteers - called "Ground Angels" - to take patients from local airports to the hospitals where they will receive treatment. If you can spare an hour or two a month transporting a patient in your car, the agency will try to schedule your assignments at times convenient to you.

For more information, contact Volunteer Houston between 8:30 a.m. to 5 p.m. Mondays-Fridays at 713-965-0031 or visit www.volunteerhouston.org.

Kingwood's Ground Angels get patients to hospitals

Nonprofit based in Kingwood helps with ground transportation from airports in a 30-mile radius of the Texas Medical Center

By **Lindsay Peyton,**

Sep 23, 2014

Houston Ground Angels is helping patients across the country and around the globe gain access to needed medical care at the Texas Medical Center.



The nonprofit organization, based in Kingwood, provides free ground transportation from airports within a 30-mile radius of the medical center using a network of volunteers who are willing to make the drive, or as they call it "complete a mission." By simply having a lift to the hospital, patients have less emotional stress and financial burden, executive director Dayton Zimmermann explained.

He said that it all got started with one phone call in 2000.

Kathy Broussard, a volunteer pilot, was doing some charity flying. "She was picking up a patient on a routine basis from a small, one-stop-sign town in Texas and flying her to MD Anderson," Zimmermann said.

The passenger called one day to cancel her trip for treatment because she could not afford transportation to and from the airport. Broussard insisted that she still come and personally drove her to the appointment after the flight.

Broussard thought other patients were probably avoiding treatment for the same reason. She decided to let other Houstonians know about this need and organize a volunteer effort.

A small ad was placed in the volunteer section of the newspaper and Houston Ground Angels was born. "It was a simple idea," Zimmermann said. "And we operated truly as a grassroots organization until 2005."

He was one of the first volunteers to respond to the ad. "It was love at first sight," Zimmermann said. "The people we work with are so grateful."

In 2005, the Houston Ground Angels gained nonprofit status. Then, in 2010, the organization opened its office and Zimmermann became executive director. In the past 13 years, the group has completed more than 16,000 missions, with patients coming in from 44 states and beyond.

Zimmermann said that the program is open to all ambulatory cancer patients, caregivers and family who need help getting to the Texas Medical Center. Eligibility is not based on financial need, and patients may travel as often as necessary.

Zimmermann said even patients with insurance are strapped for the funding needed for cancer treatment.

"People go through their savings; they have to sell their homes," he said.

Having a caregiver or family member accompany the patient to treatment requires double the airfare. Christine Durlam, a social work coordinator with MD Anderson Cancer Center, has been working the Houston Ground Angels for years.

"Our patients come from all over the nation and all over the world," she said.

"They are faced with so many expenses getting here, and now they have one less thing that they have to worry about."

Durlam added that many volunteers have reported some experience with cancer, whether they battled it themselves or had a loved one or friend with the illness. Zimmermann said that requests for transportation have grown significantly over the years.

The group has also gone from working with passengers of private pilots to helping patients using commercial airlines. Zimmermann said the Angels are able to deliver on 93 percent of the rides requested, which can be a challenge.

Volunteers go online and see if anyone is coming into town. They may select the patients to help that they can fit into their schedule.

Zimmermann said more volunteers and donations are needed.

For more information or to volunteer or make a donation, visit www.groundangels.org.



Katy Rancher & Katy News

Ground Angels help patients travel between airports, hospitals

By **Trish Johnson** Aug 5, 2014

Three facts are true about Houston Ground Angels: they fly low, fly often and there aren't enough of them. Organized in 2000, Houston Ground Angels has about 160 drivers throughout Houston and the surrounding areas who meet flights, both private and commercial, bringing patients to the Texas Medical Center. The Angels provide rides both to and from the Medical Center to airports.

Executive Director Dayton Zimmerman said the Angels have about 30 drivers taking patients to and from the Medical Center (called "missions") in the Katy and Fort Bend County area. Katy resident Richard Chidlow, 70, and Mission Bend resident Peggy Johnson, 66, know firsthand what it's like to be an Angel to patients in need.

"It's such a wonderful thing to do," Johnson said. "If you want to help people, you want to help these people. These people are fighting for their lives."

Johnson, who with her husband, Tom, has lived in Mission Bend for more than 30 years, has been with the Angels for about five years and has run about 137 missions in the first four years.

Retired from working with employee benefits, Johnson said she now averages about one or two missions a week.

"I heard about it at a quilt guild I belong to," said Johnson, who also volunteers at her church. "The founder of Houston's Ground Angels, Kathy Broussard, came to our guild and spoke with us. I thought 'this sounds flexible, I'll do it.' Two of us signed up." On a recent Thursday, Chidlow, a resident of Katy for more than 20 years, was ferrying Jerry and Frances Fletcher from Houston Southwest Airport to MD Anderson Hospital where Jerry is a patient.

"I read about the Ground Angels in a part of the Chronicle where they list volunteer organizations," said Chidlow, who is a native of England "It kind of sounded like something you can do on your own schedule. If I'm away, like in the U.K., nobody suffers.

"When I first started, I tried to take a mission at each airport that came up so I could learn where they all are." Retired after 20 years with Oceaneering, a global oilfield provider of engineering, Chidlow said he makes two or three missions a week.

Drivers pick up patients and their companions, if there are any, at any one of eight small airports as well as Bush Intercontinental or Hobby airports, where patients are flown either by private pilots, corporate planes or commercial airlines. In many cases, the private pilots belong to groups like Pilots for Patients in Louisiana, Angel Flight in Oklahoma or Angel Network for corporate planes.

The Fletchers, for instance, were flown in from Lake Providence, Louisiana, by Don Imhoff, a member of Pilots for Patients. "I have flown over 127 flights for Pilots with Patients," Imhoff said, "51 of them last year."

The Fletchers were making a regular trip for a daylong appointment at MD Anderson. "We've been coming over here for a year last December," said Frances, 58. This day was the first time they had come by plane.

"We've been driving," said Jerry, 67. "That takes about eight hours and that about kills me," said Jerry, 67. "My daughter used to bring us, but she got a new job and couldn't take time off from work." "Y'all just don't know what this means to us," said Frances.

We definitely need more drivers in Katy and Fort Bend County," said Zimmerman, 53.

"If you're around people coming in for treatment, you begin to see the financial devastation that takes place. People go through their savings, their 401Ks, their church homes are helping buy tickets. it just chews through their finances." Zimmerman, who is a cancer survivor, said.

Prospective volunteers should go to www.groundangels.org, and click on "Volunteer."