

Angels in the skies

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FITCHBURG -- Medical helicopters are at the ready to take critically injured patients to the hospital after an accident or health emergency.

But what happens when people with less urgent -- but still serious -- medical conditions need to get to the best hospitals quickly?

Charley Valera, president of the Fitchburg Pilots Association, said rather than force people to take long road trips to Boston or other cities in the Northeast, local pilots want to offer another mode of transportation: small aircraft.

Valera and about a dozen other members of the Fitchburg Pilots Association are being trained to become certified Angel Flight Northeast pilots, which will make air travel to hospitals available from North Central Massachusetts.

"It's just a good way to give back to the community, to people in need," Valera said.

Angel Flight Northeast is a nonprofit organization that provides flights to patients and families with critical health-care needs. Flights are provided at no cost to patients and their family members. Pilots use their own airplanes, and pay for fuel and other expenses.

The Fitchburg Pilots Association met last week with Dick Sundell, who handles community outreach for Angel Flight Northeast. Sundell gave a presentation about what's required to become a certified Angel Flight pilot, and the training process.

Valera will participate in training this week at Lawrence Municipal Airport, where Angel Flight is based. Upon completion, his name will be added to the roster of available pilots. Sundell said Valera will be getting calls for service before long.

"Local pilots around the Boston area are always very popular," Sundell said, adding that Angel Flight Northeast pilots make about 100 trips in an average week. In 2010, about 5,200 flights were provided to those in need.

Passengers might be cancer patients who need to get to the hospital for a procedure or checkup, or family members who must travel long distances to visit loved ones.

To become certified, pilots must have a minimum number of flight hours and be authorized to fly using navigational instruments in inclement weather.

Edward Murphy, co-founder and past president of the Fitchburg Pilots Association, understands the satisfaction that comes with providing flights to patients and families for free. Murphy was an Air Lifeline pilot years ago, before Angel Flight Northeast merged with and absorbed the organization.

Murphy remembers bringing one little boy and his mother to a major hospital, first for his treatments, and as he recovered, for follow-up visits. Murphy was their pilot a couple of times a year for five years.

"I can remember his mother coming over and thanking me," Murphy said. "It was worth it, for the time it took. That was great."

To book a flight, patients and families should call Angel Flight Northeast at 800-549-9980. An intake process that takes about 15 minutes is required before booking.

Visit www.angelflightne.org for more information or to donate.

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