

CASE STUDY



AIRPORTS AND COVID-19 RELIEF EFFORTS

Note: This case study was written while the COVID-19 pandemic was still underway.

In early 2020 the novel coronavirus, COVID-19, began spreading across the world. During this time, travel activity at all airports was effectively halted as health and pandemic related restrictions were imposed to limit the spread of the virus. Despite this downturn in activity, Illinois' airports remained busy as they shifted focus to supporting pandemic relief efforts. Illinois' airports supported COVID-19 testing efforts for travelers and employees throughout the state. Once vaccines began to roll out, Illinois airports were at the forefront of vaccine distribution. Specific examples of Illinois airports support of national and global COVID-19 relief efforts are described below.

COVID-19 TESTING EFFORTS

Several of Illinois' commercial service airports offered rapid and standard COVID-19 testing for travelers and employees. Both types of tests were available to travelers and employees for a fee. Airports, such as Chicago Midway International Airport (MDW) and Chicago O'Hare International Airport (ORD) used available space to host and operate walk-up testing sites in locations, such as airport parking garages and shuttle terminals.¹ At the time of this writing, ORD also planned to open a drive-up site in one of its economy parking lots. Collectively, ORD and MDW helped administer over 16,000 daily COVID tests in Chicago.² Outside of Chicago, Central Illinois Regional Airport (BMI) supported COVID-19 testing efforts in Bloomington, Illinois. The airport provided their long-term parking lot for space to conduct rapid COVID testing.



VACCINE DISTRIBUTION EFFORTS

Logistics facilities at ORD were critical for vaccine distribution efforts across Illinois. DHL operates a 434,000 square-foot life sciences facility at ORD. The DHL facility at ORD was able to accommodate thousands of temperature-sensitive vaccine doses and ensure the proper storage and distribution of other medical products.³ Vaccine doses began arriving to the airport for distribution in November 2020 on chartered United Airlines flights.⁴ United Airlines flights carrying vaccines arrived at ORD from manufacturing sites across the world. In preparation for receiving the temperature sensitive vaccines, the airline transported 15,000 pounds of dry ice per flight (with FAA approval) to keep the vaccines cold and viable.⁵ Each aircraft used to deliver vaccines carried over one million doses.



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VACCINATION EFFORTS AT ILLINOIS AIRPORTS

In March 2021, DuPage Airport (DPA) partnered with the City of West Chicago to administer over 2,000 doses of the COVID-19 vaccine.⁶ To accommodate this effort, DPA converted a 32,000-square-foot hangar into a vaccination site. The hangar provided enough space to accommodate social distancing and safe entry and exit requirements. The preparation of the hangar required the relocation of several aircraft in order to provide space for 10 vaccination stations.



Commercial airlines also assisted in vaccination efforts at Illinois' airports by offering vaccines for employees at ORD. Both United Airlines and American Airlines offered vaccinations to their employees at designated sites within ORD.⁷ Vaccines provided by United were available to their ORD employees over 65 years old and all flight crew members. American Airlines vaccines were available to their ORD employees with customer-facing baggage claim employees receiving first priority for vaccinations.

¹ Chicago Department of Aviation, FlyChicago Business Media, 2021

² Chicago COVID-19: Mayor Lori Lightfoot Announces Coronavirus Testing Expansion, with New Site at Midway, Craig Wall, Cate Caugiran, 2020

³ Jeff Berman, Logistics Management, 2019

⁴ J. Ryne Danielson, Patch, 2020

⁵ Alison Sider and Peter Loftus, The Wall Street Journal, 2020

⁶ Dupage Airport Authority, 2021

⁷ NBC Chicago, "United, American Airlines to Open Vaccination Sites at O'Hare Airport," 2021

SUMMARY

Airports and airlines across Illinois have leveraged their resources to support testing and vaccination efforts during the COVID-19 pandemic. Illinois' airports were quickly able to respond to pandemic relief efforts due to available space and staff during times of low-air-travel activity due to health and pandemic related restrictions. Illinois' airports assisted in shipping, receiving, and administering COVID tests and vaccines across the state, nation, and world.