

**Exchange
Income
Corporation**



Exchange Income Corporation - Partnership with Indigenous Services Canada to Sustain Northern and First Nations Nursing Services Through the Pandemic

As the reality of a global pandemic set in during the last days of March 2020, airline carriers across Canada began reducing flights, closing routes, and eventually parking aircraft.

Among the thousands of Canadians disrupted from their normal travel were the hundreds of nurses and support staff who routinely deploy from cities and towns across the country into First Nations communities, many in the North, to provide vital medical care.

Delivered by Indigenous Services Canada (ISC), working in conjunction with provincial and territorial governments, the department's community health nursing program sustains nursing stations and medical clinics that are a lifeline in isolated communities hundreds of kilometres from major medical centres. Pre-pandemic, nurses would access commercial scheduled options to travel from as far as Victoria, British Columbia, and St. John's, Newfoundland, through airport hubs into more than 75 communities throughout the sub-Arctic.

But as routes decreased, flights dwindled and the need to ensure safe, quarantined travel increased, that lifeline became unsustainable using scheduled flights.

To maintain health and other professional services in remote communities, ISC and a group of federal departments needed a solution to maintain access to the communities they serve and needed a partner capable of providing it.

Like many companies in the early days of the pandemic, Exchange Income Corporation (EIC) and its aviation subsidiaries were working to figure out their place in Canada's new aviation reality and determining how they could ensure vital services remained in place for the communities they serve. As an early mover of essential personal protective equipment into northern communities, the EIC family of companies had demonstrated its "depth and breadth" as a national aviation presence capable of helping government, noted Philip Earle, Vice-President of Business Development at Air Borealis, and was well positioned to help.



By mid-May, EIC and the Government of Canada had agreed to the development of a solution that would ensure ongoing, safe access to travel for nurses working in First Nations communities. EIC began to quickly assemble a network of carriers - drawing on its own subsidiaries and partners prequalified through a government standing offer and supply arrangement – to secure the necessary aircraft, and ground support operations to accommodate nurses as they travelled to and from their work sites.

It was a massive and complex logistical undertaking, acknowledged Earle, primary client liaison for the project. Many airports were almost empty and supporting services were limited. Yet, to move hundreds of nurses in a single day on flights operated to the highest standard of medical safety, with minimal stops and while respecting provincial and territorial pandemic health protocols, EIC needed to build an intricate and well-synchronized hub and spoke system. Within weeks the company had established a network of charter centre hubs, hotels, shuttle buses and other services stretching from Halifax, to Montréal, Toronto, Thunder Bay, Winnipeg and Thompson, Manitoba.

An average rotation – which took place about every 15 days during the height of the pandemic – could involve around 350 to 400 nurses covering 170 and 200 flight legs, employing 50

to 55 aircraft from 18 to 20 operators, arriving and departing from around 70 aerodromes. With social distancing and strict health and safety protocols in place on all flights, a typical day might see nurses beginning on a 737, switching to an ATR 72 or Dash 8-300, and landing at their destination on a Beach 1900D or PC-12.

On April 20, 2020, for example, the rotation of 346 nurses required 187 legs, 21 air operators, 72 aerodromes, and 57 aircraft. As recently as August 12, 2021, 314 nurses travelled through 69 aerodromes and 180 legs on 58 aircraft from 20 operators.

“There have been days during the pandemic where the ISC rotation was likely the largest commercial airline flying in the country that day,” Earle observed.



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**With so many unknowns about COVID,
these charters were a big part of
supplying health care and health care
workers to communities.**

James Ward, CEO & President, Wasaya Airways



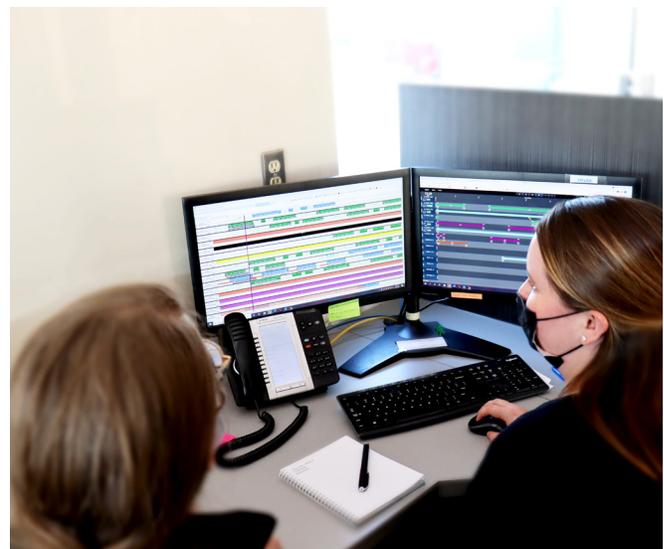
Large, and absolutely essential, added James Ward, President and Chief Executive Officer of Wasaya Airways, a company owned by 12 First Nations in Northwestern Ontario in partnership with EIC. Where many in southern Canada might take for granted the ability to reach medical services, remote communities know the necessity of airlift. “Ensuring nurses could continue to travel in and out in a safe manner was huge,” he said.

To appreciate the scope of each rotation, consider the coordination required to reliably transit hundreds of nurses from across the country in and out of the remote First Nations communities of northern Manitoba and Ontario through four principal hubs in Winnipeg, Thompson, Thunder Bay and Sioux Lookout.

Before the pandemic, Charter Connexions served as a charter broker for a family of EIC subsidiaries, including Bearskin Airlines, Calm Air, Custom Helicopters, Keewatin Air and Perimeter Aviation. As soon as the ISC need

was identified, Naomi van der Wal and a small team stepped forward to bring their unique skills experience to bear in finding aircraft and plotting itineraries.

In the days before each rotation, they identify available aircraft from EIC carriers and Western partners, and then map routes to an ISC manifest of nurses and destination communities, “building the best route out of those four hubs,” she explained.



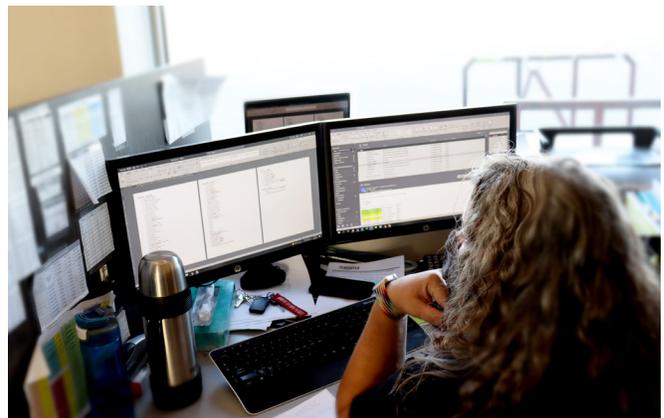


On rotation day, early morning flights from the West Coast and Eastern Canada will begin landing in Winnipeg and Thunder Bay – originating in cities like Halifax, Montréal, Toronto and Vancouver – by 0900, and by 1200 nurses will be on smaller aircraft into Thompson and Sioux Lookout, and onto isolated communities across both provinces where many will immediately go to work.

To mitigate risk while still providing small comforts such as rest areas, coffee and charging stations, Charter Connexions has used expanded facilities with limited touch points at each hub airport, “fogged” each facility after departures, and cleaned all surfaces in every aircraft before returning with homeward-bound passengers. These extra steps – put in place progressively as the industry’s understanding of how to prevent the spread of COVID has evolved – have allowed nurses to quarantine at home, maintain quarantine status through their journey, and get right to work when they arrive in the community.



“If everything goes smoothly, it is managing people, all the bags, and getting everyone to the right spot,” said van der Wal, a process that is made smoother by PAL Airlines reservation system that allows everyone to see the entire picture in real time.



Thankfully, mechanical problems have been rare, but Charter Connexions nonetheless has an aircraft on standby in both Winnipeg and Thunder Bay if needed and a recovery plan that kept each day moving, regardless of the disruption. Superb partners in each hub and close collaboration with local airport authorities have ensured a ramp plan that positions aircraft so none is left holding for another to depart. Weather, however, is the one variable they can’t control, and winter storms have on occasion turned a typical 10- to 12-hour day into a 17-hour marathon.

“We appreciate building those relationships,” she said. “They can see how busy we are, and they know we do our best. But we always want them to tell us how we can make it better.”

Naomi van der Wal, Manager Corporate Charters,
Charter Connexions



Eighteen months in and van der Wal and her team are on a first-name basis with many of the nurses who transit their hubs. Those health practitioners have been extremely grateful for the safe travel the EIC team provides.

“The way they set this up – the charters, the limitations on the number of people in the aircraft, the cleaning – was a huge factor in keeping COVID out of our communities,” added Ward.



The ISC program has served as a demonstration of the collective strength of EIC’s member companies. But it also speaks to the organization’s ability to build trusted

partnerships. While EIC was uniquely positioned to serve ISC’s needs – both in terms of scope of existing network and depth of relationships in the communities ISC serves – the company’s ability to work seamlessly and on a trusted basis with other aviation companies nationwide has also been critical to the project’s success. “Because we were able to confirm the program would be ongoing and we needed their services, many companies have been able to bring employees back to work around this activity,” said Earle. “We were very conscious about balancing how the networks were built so that we could continue to give support to smaller companies that had reduced staff to ensure the required network could always be constructed.”

“The ISC charters were helpful in keeping us above water through this pandemic,” noted Ward. With passenger traffic declining and little known about the duration of the pandemic, the guaranteed business went a long way to strengthening Wasaya employee morale. “The ISC charters played a very important part in where we are sitting today.”



As aircraft are gradually returning to Canadian skies with declining infection rates and mandatory vaccine mandates coming into force, the nature of EIC’s charter service for nurses will evolve. But critically, the program has underscored the trust hundreds of medical professionals and dozens of First Nations communities have been willing to place in EIC. Assuring both the nurses and the communities that travel would be safe despite COVID alleviated significant concerns. “It took a lot of the stress and anxiety out of travel for these medical professionals,” said Earle. “To work hand-in-glove with ISC to move all these people, with all these aircraft, through all these communities in a country as large as Canada, and do so almost without a fault, is pretty amazing. It has been a huge source of pride for us.”