

Varnum Partner Flies High For COVID-19 Relief

By Aebra Coe

Law360 (May 27, 2020, 3:43 PM EDT) -- Some remote areas of Michigan are more than a seven-hour drive through vast expanses of national forest from the state's capital, where COVID-19 testing kits are being distributed, making the delivery and retrieval of the kits a major logistical challenge for the Michigan State Police.

That's why Varnum LLP estate planning partner Christopher Ballard dedicated his time and skills as an amateur pilot to a volunteer mission to distribute test kits to remote areas of Michigan by plane. During the mission, Ballard both piloted a plane himself and coordinated other pilots in his role as a major in the Civil Air Patrol, which is the civilian arm of the U.S. Air Force.

"Seeing the western Upper Peninsula [of Michigan] from the air is absolutely incredible," Ballard said of the experience. "There are trees everywhere, beautiful rolling hills, and we could see Lake Superior in the distance. It was gorgeous."

The mission lasted for two weeks, during which time Ballard served as air operations branch director, coordinating all the other pilots and their flights. He took his turn on May 12 to pilot a plane.

That day, Ballard arrived in Lansing at 10 a.m. For the next 12 hours, he and two team members from the air patrol completed the mission, loading up a Cessna 206 and making four flights across the state to deliver the kits, pick up more and unload again at the state's capital.

Ballard said he was happy to be able to use a skill that not many people have in order to give back.

"I am somebody who has been actively involved in the nonprofit arena my entire career. Civil Air Patrol gives me a way of doing that and also incorporating my love of flying at the same time," he said.

In addition to the COVID-19 relief mission, Ballard piloted a recent flight that aided the Federal Emergency Management Agency in obtaining photos of flood damage in Midland, Michigan, after two dams broke May 20.



Varnum LLP partner Chris Ballard

Ballard first learned to fly almost 25 years ago.

When he was a child, his father had a friend who was a pilot and took him on a flight. From that moment he knew he wanted to learn to fly, but it wasn't until he'd finished school and established himself as a lawyer that he was able to pursue that dream.



Varnum LLP partner Christopher Ballard, center, took part May 12 in a mission to deliver and retrieve COVID-19 testing kits from remote areas of Michigan's Upper Peninsula, along with fellow members of the Civil Air Patrol, William Vandermolen, left, and Christian Felton.



Ballard, right, pilots a Cessna 206 alongside his fellow Civil Air Patrol member Christian Felton.

"It was a lifelong passion I was finally able to fulfill," he said. "And after I was a pilot for a while, I looked for a way to use that skill to give back."

Five years ago, his daughter — who is a senior in high school — took an interest in aerospace engineering and wanted to learn about flying. She found out about a meeting of the Civil Air Patrol and asked her father to take her. He did and loved it, joining the patrol and later earning the rank of major.

The patrol participates in a number of disaster relief missions, and also helps with search and rescue in cases of missing persons in remote areas. They also help the Air Force remain prepared by acting as targets for Air Force fighter jets.



Ballard, left, helps unload COVID-19 testing kits during a recent mission to distribute the kits to remote areas of Michigan.

Ballard says he loves participating in the patrol for the same reason he loves being an attorney in a law firm — he's able to work as part of a larger team to achieve a goal.

"You're not in it by yourself. You're part of a team helping to achieve a larger good," he said. "I love the opportunity to continue training, learn new skills and apply those skills to something that's bigger than myself."

--Editing by Kelly Duncan and Alanna Weissman.