

The Unique Value of Blue Grass Airport

While solid numbers to explain the value of Blue Grass Airport (LEX) are useful, communicating how \$700 million in economic output impacts a particular individual can be challenging. Often, a better way to help an individual relate to the airport's benefits is to provide anecdotal examples with which the individual can identify. This section addresses the qualitative benefits of LEX, along with three case studies that help illustrate specific examples that can be more relatable than economic impact numbers.

Qualitative Benefits

The airport contributes economic impacts in the form of employment, payroll, and output. In addition to these quantifiable benefits, there are additional benefits that make it challenging, or, in some cases, impossible, to assign a value. Nevertheless, these qualitative benefits are important contributions from Blue Grass Airport.

These qualitative benefits take many different forms. The examples illustrated below are a sampling of the many ways Blue Grass Airport benefits the region beyond its economic contributions.

Air ambulance flights operate daily out of Blue Grass Airport. These operations serve all necessary medical purposes, including medical personnel transport, patient transfers, and lifesaving emergency flights. By serving these flights, medical professionals can reach remotely located patients and save lives throughout the region. Beyond Lexington's geographic area, the airport has also given other regions quick and efficient access to the medical facilities within the Lexington community.

In addition to Blue Grass Airport's team of onsite Police, Fire and Emergency Medical Services, occasionally, local and state police departments operate at Blue Grass Airport to ensure the community's safety. This includes aerial search efforts, prisoner transport, and police and firefighter training activities. Military aircraft training and exercises are conducted at the airport on a consistent basis. The airport has served as a convenient facility for the region's first responders and military personnel, providing an additional measure for protecting the region.

Beyond the quantitative general aviation (GA) impacts, there are also qualitative benefits that GA brings to the region. These activities include recreational flights. The airport is a frequent destination for general aviation enthusiasts visiting the region or seeking fixed-base operator (FBO) services, such as aircraft maintenance or fueling. Signature Aviation is the full-service FBO located on the airfield and provides fueling service, deicing, maintenance, and ramp space for parking. The airport is home to approximately 65 GA hangars, which also contribute to the volume of GA activity that the airport sees daily.

Business aviation and chartered flights are additional users of the airport, generating significant revenue and stimulating the region's economy. Local businesses base their flight departments at the airport to facilitate business travel. LEX is a convenient location for those in the region wanting to charter a flight, as it provides the necessary facilities to accommodate such travel arrangements.

The airport has had a major impact on the local economy by serving as a destination for those traveling to the region for world-renowned equestrian events and the Kentucky Derby held annually in Louisville. Aside from the equestrian industry, Blue Grass Airport supports aviation activity for Lexmark, Tempur-Sealy, University of Kentucky, Toyota Motor Manufacturing Kentucky, Lockheed Martin, and many other central Kentucky businesses.

Blue Grass Airport makes it a priority to support the Lexington community, and it stays involved with local programs and organizations. The airport hosts several events annually, including Honor Flight Kentucky send offs and arrivals for military veterans, general aviation barbecues, and presentations to community leaders and organizations. Additionally, LEX leadership partners with community organizations such as Commerce Lexington, American Red Cross Bluegrass Area Chapter, Aviation Museum of Kentucky, Breeders' Cup, Kentuckians for Better Transportation, Lexington Bluegrass Area Minority Business Expo and Urban League of Lexington-Fayette County to maintain support and involvement with local like-minded organizations.

The promotion of aviation in the central Kentucky region is important for the airport. Blue Grass Airport supports the Eastern Kentucky University (EKU) aviation program through many efforts, including providing internship and volunteering opportunities to their students. The EKU program is based at Central Kentucky Regional Airport, located about 32 miles southeast of LEX near Richmond, Kentucky. Staff from LEX have also served as lecturers for EKU aviation classes. LEX staff work to provide tours for youth programs in the area, such as the Boy Scouts, to reach and inspire younger audiences.

The airport has been recognized as a great employer in the region and has been awarded one of the best places to work in Kentucky by the Worksite Wellness Council of Louisville. Other awards from the Worksite Wellness Council of Louisville that recognize Blue Grass Airport's wellness program include multiple Fleur De Lis awards, along with Platinum and Gold awards. The airport was also one of six airports to receive the 2022 *Airport Business* Projects of the Year for its extraordinary efforts to complete the complex rehabilitation of Runway 4/22 in August 2021.

Case Studies

The study team gathered information for three case studies that helped show how Blue Grass Airport does more than create jobs and produce economic activity. These case studies show how the airport and its people look to the future aviation workforce, engage with the community through the support of Honor Flight Kentucky, and aid the organ transplant operations of local hospitals.

Aviation Career Development

For the past 77 years, Blue Grass Airport has provided a key transportation hub for the Lexington region. It has also served as a training ground for the future aviation industry workforce. LEX accomplishes this through both obvious and subtle ways. The obvious mechanisms include the various flight schools instructing future helicopter and fixed-wing pilots and Thoroughbred Aviation Maintenance, which provides targeted training programs for aircraft maintenance technicians. However, many people may not fully appreciate, or even be aware of, the more subtle aviation promotion that occurs at LEX.

Influencing the Next Generation of Aviators—An Example

Among the subtle influences found at LEX, formal and informal programs nurture the next generation of flight enthusiasts. A classic example is Lieutenant Junior Grade (LTJG) Lincoln Kilgore, who is going through flight training with the U.S. Navy in Pensacola, Florida. He credits Blue Grass Airport for guiding him down his path of success, including helping with his acceptance to Officer Candidate School (OCS)—a prerequisite to his Navy flight training. To understand how, let's take a quick look at LTJG Kilgore's background.

From Pilot to Naval Aviator

LTJG Kilgore, originally from Paintsville, Kentucky, fell in love with aviation as a three year old on his first airline flight from LEX to Florida. His flying career started with a discovery flight from nearby Big Sandy Regional Airport (SJS). His grandmother enrolled him in flight school at Paintsville-Prestonsburg-Combs Field (9KY9), a privately-owned airfield where he earned his private pilot certificate shortly after graduating from high school. His keen interest in aviation led him to Blue Grass Airport.

After enrolling at Eastern Kentucky University (EKU), LTJG Kilgore volunteered at the Aviation Museum of Kentucky, located on LEX property. In 2017, LTJG Kilgore served as a museum docent, answering visitors' questions, providing tours, and manning the gift shop. This led to him volunteering at the museum's aviation summer camp, where he passed along his aviation knowledge to those new to aviation. He served as a flight simulator instructor, using his knowledge as a pilot to teach basic aircraft operations, demonstrate take offs and landings, and show navigation techniques on cross-country flights. He coached camp participants as young as six to as old as 98 through aeronautical maneuvers on the simulator. He answered questions from prospective student pilots, explaining how he achieved his dream of becoming a pilot. And while he was helping the next generation explore aviation, he was also picking up valuable skills of his own. Most importantly, he met some phenomenal people who shared his interest in aviation.

His experience at the museum and the people he met helped him obtain a job at WestLEX, the airport-owned general aviation services provider. Starting in 2018, he moved aircraft and refueled planes until 2021, when he graduated from EKU. But, as valuable as the experience of working around airplanes was, he said that his most valuable takeaway was the aviation network he developed. He had the opportunity to build relationships with staff from LEX, connect to his co-workers at WestLEX, and learn from the aviation mechanics of Thoroughbred Aviation Maintenance. Additionally, he had time to develop friendships with members of the Lexington Flying Club and staff at NexGen Aviation, a flight school and charter operator based at LEX.

Following graduation from EKU in the spring of 2021, LTJG Kilgore applied for and was accepted to OCS. He completed OCS training in December 2021 and then headed to Pensacola, Florida for primary flight training.

“...The magnanimity of how Eric Frankl, Erik Guttersen, and the museum folks treat people. They really care about people and it's something that I try to emulate.”

LTJG Lincoln Kilgore



Figure 9: This McDonnell Douglas A-4 Skyhawk on static display at the Aviation Museum of Kentucky may have motivated other aspiring naval aviators besides LTJG Kilgore.

LTJG Kilgore credits many people with his success, starting with his mom, Nancy, and grandmother, Bonnie. To that list, he adds Larry Short, his first flight instructor, and individuals from the Aviation Museum of Kentucky.

"I always say that people like operations manager Hunter Moore, Gerald Landreth, Calvin Smith, Ed Murphy—all the folks in the museum—if it weren't for them, I wouldn't have gotten the job at WestLEX," LTJG Kilgore stated. Once he started working for LEX, he found that airport staff, such as airport President & CEO Eric Frankl and Aviation Services Manager Erik Guttersen, were instrumental in mentoring him and helping with his career. He is convinced that recommendations from these individuals were critical in getting accepted to OCS, where he was commissioned into the Navy. He related that the example they set continues to motivate him in his leadership role and interactions with his enlisted sailors.

LTJG Kilgore graduated from primary flight training at the top of his 26-member class in late 2023, earning him the privilege of choosing his follow-on training. He selected a coveted tactical air slot, meaning he would have a chance to fly jet fighters, while many in his class were assigned to fly P-8s, a twin-engine maritime patrol and anti-submarine aircraft. LTJG Kilgore has orders to Meridian, Mississippi, where he will undergo advanced training in the T-45 Goshawk and earn his wings of gold. He will then be assigned to a fleet squadron for transition to an operational jet, where he will fulfill his oath to defend the country and our Constitution.

LTJG Kilgore is one example of how Blue Grass Airport is nurturing the future of aviation. Not only does the airport help introduce the next generation to aviation, but the staff and leadership of LEX set an example for them to emulate no matter what field they choose to pursue.

Honor Flight Kentucky

Blue Grass Airport and its staff are faithful supporters of the Lexington community. Every year, LEX hosts various events and lends support to organizations that promote the welfare of Kentuckians. One event, in particular, that reaches several generations and evokes a sense of Kentucky pride like no other is Honor Flight Kentucky.

Honor Flight Kentucky is one of many independent hubs that support the Honor Flight Network. The Honor Flight's mission is to fly World War II, Korean War, and Vietnam War veterans to Washington, D.C., for an all-expenses-paid day where they experience memorials intended to honor their service and sacrifice. Honor Flight Kentucky focuses on veterans in central, eastern, and southern Kentucky and currently has a waiting list of more than 500 eligible veterans.

Time is against Honor Flight Kentucky. As the Greatest Generation and subsequent generations of veterans pass away, the opportunity for them to experience the memorials in Washington, D.C., diminishes. Honor Flight Kentucky endeavors to give that experience to as many vets as possible before it is too late.

Honor Flight Kentucky volunteers work hard to make this possible by obtaining sponsors for each flight. Kentucky's Touchstone Energy Cooperatives and Toyota Motor Manufacturing Kentucky have been steadfast sponsors for Honor Flights. Money is also raised through private donors and No Greater Honor 5K Runs.

Honor Flight Kentucky works with American Airlines to provide several flights every year. Chartered aircraft take approximately 70 veterans, along with an equal number of guardians (who pay their way) to guide each veteran. The flight crew and event organizers round out the flight manifest.

Blue Grass Airport works throughout the year to assist in the coordination of these events. This includes providing an event space, hosting breakfast, providing necessary sound equipment and staging, and assembling the organizations, such as Rolling Thunder, Civil Air Patrol, and others, that arrive to give the veterans a well-deserved sendoff. Honor Flight volunteers are instrumental in organizing the welcome home event that greets the returning veterans. Crowds as large as 1,000 people cheer the veterans as they pass through the LEX terminal. Along with groups like the Boy and Girl Scouts, and veteran groups, Honor Flight volunteers encourage individuals to come out to welcome these heroes home and take the opportunity to thank them for their service.

This is particularly important, as many veterans, especially those from the Vietnam era, never received a proper reception when they came back from the war zone. In a small way, this makes up for the mistreatment from decades ago. One way to illustrate this is to look at the example of Captain Linda Cunningham, a U.S. Army veteran who served from 1979 to 1989 and has been a veteran on an Honor Flight, served as a guardian, and volunteers with Honor Flight Kentucky.

"We literally marched from TSA to the far end of the airport and the crowd was still six people deep. All of them wanting to shake your hand and tell you thank you...and it was just so impactful."

CPT Linda Cunningham, Veteran

Honor Flight Veteran

CPT Cunningham's initial involvement with Honor Flight began when she was invited to participate in the first all-female Honor Flight. The flight, which took place in June 2022, accommodated 134 female veterans who served from the Vietnam era up to the War on Terror. With so many veterans, there wasn't space to seat guardians, so veterans served as each other's guardians. CPT Cunningham said that their tour of Washington, D.C. included a stop at the Military Women's Memorial, where each veteran was inducted to the memorial. Her group also attended a changing of the guard at the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier. Other stops included the Marine Corps War Memorial, where her group received a 21-gun salute, and CPT Cunningham collected one of the brass casings from the salute.

"Being a guardian was every bit as emotionally impactful and rewarding as being a veteran, especially watching those Vietnam veterans come off that flight, and be thanked, and be appreciated."

CPT Linda Cunningham, Veteran

Upon their return to Lexington, CPT Cunningham said they experienced one of the largest greeting crowds in Honor Flight history. There were multiple chapters of Daughters of the American Revolution, bagpipers, friends, and family members, many holding welcoming signs and all cheering for the returning veterans.

"Men veterans wear that baseball hat that screams, 'I am a veteran.' Women, for the most part, don't do that, and so we become invisible. This was a chance to see the whole world say, 'Yes, you are a veteran, and we appreciate you.' That's an invaluable gift." She compared the experience to Vietnam veterans who are grateful for Honor Flight, giving them the welcome home they never got when they returned from war.

Honor Flight Guardian

CPT Cunningham was so moved by her experience on her Honor Flight that she felt compelled to serve as an Honor Flight guardian, where she would pay her own way on an Honor Flight to assist a veteran during his/her experience.

She had the opportunity to serve as an Honor Flight guardian in April 2023. She was paired at random with a female veteran who served in the Army roughly the same time CPT Cunningham did. She arranged to have lunch with her veteran to get to know each other before their flight. She mentioned that her veteran even had a connection to LEX, working as an air traffic controller at the airport after getting out of the Army. During their visit to Washington, D.C., CPT Cunningham said the visits to the Vietnam Memorials were particularly moving because her veteran had family members who served during Vietnam.

Upon returning from her guardian Honor Flight, CPT Cunningham decided to do even more for Honor Flight and became an Honor Flight volunteer.

Honor Flight Volunteer

Her first duty as an Honor Flight volunteer was helping organize and execute the sendoff for the September 2023 Honor Flight. She plans to continue her volunteer efforts by serving as a bus captain for the May 2024 Honor Flight, where she will be responsible for the busload of veterans and guardians. But that isn't the only volunteering that CPT Cunningham does for Honor Flight. She has helped them update their databases, supported their 5K fundraising efforts, and agreed to serve on their board of directors.

CPT Cunningham said, "I can't think of a more worthy organization to give my time to. What that trip does for the veterans is priceless." And it can't happen without the support of LEX staff. "We take over the Blue Grass Airport when the flight comes home," said CPT Cunningham. "For me, the most important part of the day is that homecoming, and that doesn't happen without the airport."



Figure 10: CPT Linda Cunningham is greeted at LEX upon her return from her first Honor Flight.

Efforts such as these turn Blue Grass Airport from a transportation hub into a community center. Veterans will remember the airport as where they received their long overdue welcome home, where children met some of their first heroes, and where the Lexington community comes together to take pride in who they are and the example they set for future generations.

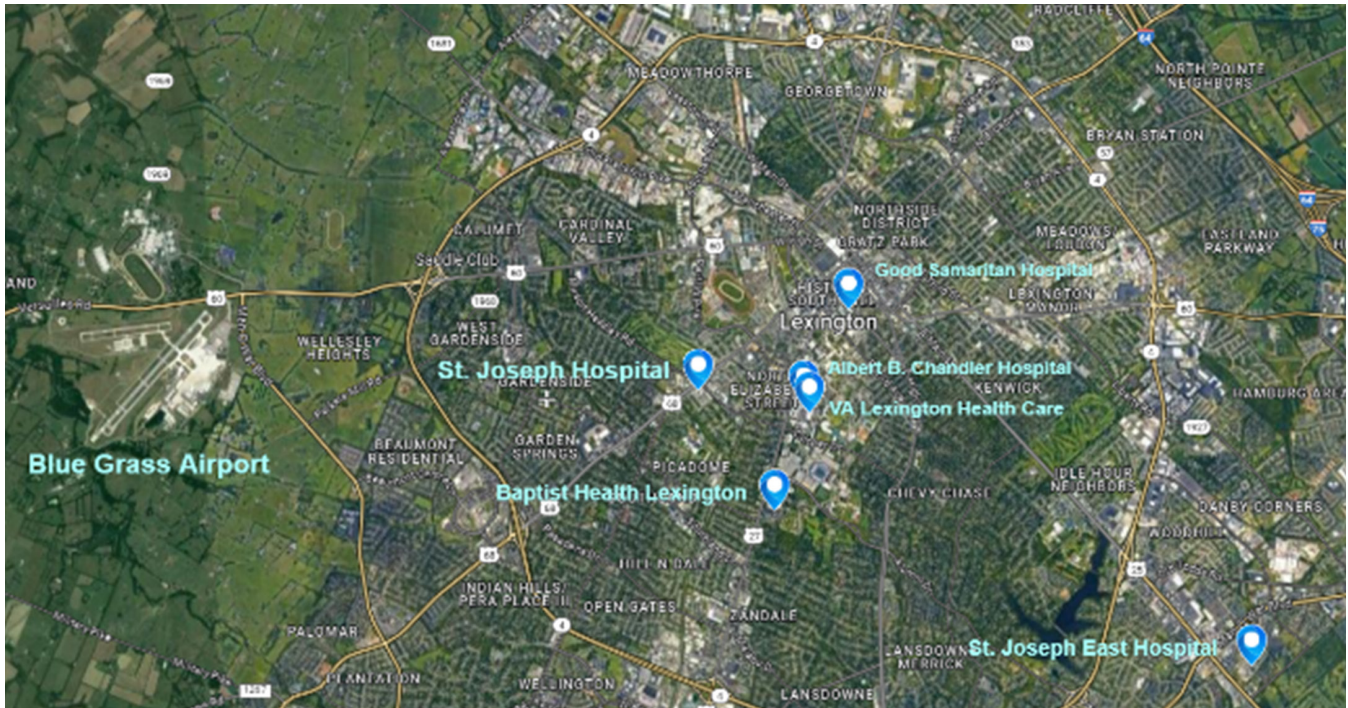
Healthcare Use of Aviation

The use of aviation by the healthcare industry is a significant benefit that Blue Grass Airport provides to the community. This case study looks at how LEX supports the medical community of Lexington and the surrounding area.

Supporting Emergency Flights

Lexington has a huge catchment area for health services, partly due to the city's large number of hospitals and health services (see **Figure 11**). According to Blue Grass Airport's Public Safety Medical Director, Dr. Ryan Stanton, MD, FACEP, a good number of Lexington's hospitals make use of aviation, especially helicopters. He also serves as the Kentucky and Florida medical director for AirMed International, an air medical transport company that has conducted more than 25,000 medical air missions. He said that medical helicopters refuel at LEX because of the airport's proximity to these hospitals. These aircraft also use LEX when weather conditions preclude the use of hospital helipads. While the majority of medical flights are in helicopters, there are a small number of patient transport flights, and the University of Kentucky organ transplant program frequently flies into and out of LEX.

Figure 11:
Location of Lexington Area Hospitals Relative to Blue Grass Airport



Source: Mead & Hunt

Lexington has the only Comprehensive Stroke Center in the region. Very few places conduct mechanical thrombectomies (a surgical procedure that physically removes the blood clot causing a stroke), so the people of Lexington are fortunate to have this option available, and this service attracts many stroke patients. Time is critical for stroke patients, where outcomes can range from full recovery to permanent disabilities if medical attention isn't administered quickly enough.

Dr. Stanton mentioned that Baptist Health has handled as many as 10 stroke emergencies in a day. He pointed out that when a stroke takes place in, for example, Pikeville, Kentucky, the patient is two and a half hours away by ground transport but only 45 minutes by air ambulance, and that time difference is often crucial for the patient's outcome.

In addition to a ground ambulance not being fast enough, transporting a patient via a ground ambulance from a distant community to Lexington deprives that community of the ambulance for the duration of the trip. Especially for smaller communities with limited resources, the temporary loss of their ambulance can jeopardize the health and safety of other patients in the community.

Blue Grass Airport is the closest airport to all of Lexington's hospitals. It has the best instrument approaches among any airport in the region. Compared to other airports in the region, it can clear its runway and taxiways of snow faster and more frequently. With the addition of WestLEX, the airport offers more service options, Dr. Stanton said, and the people at WestLEX are excellent to work with and provide outstanding service.

One final advantage of LEX Dr. Stanton mentioned is the military presence, which enhances medical preparedness through events such as chemical stockpile emergency preparedness (CSEP) training drills and the presence of critical care air transport teams (CCATT). The Blue Grass Airport Regional Aircraft Rescue and Fire Fighting (ARFF) Training Center on LEX property also enhances medical preparedness.

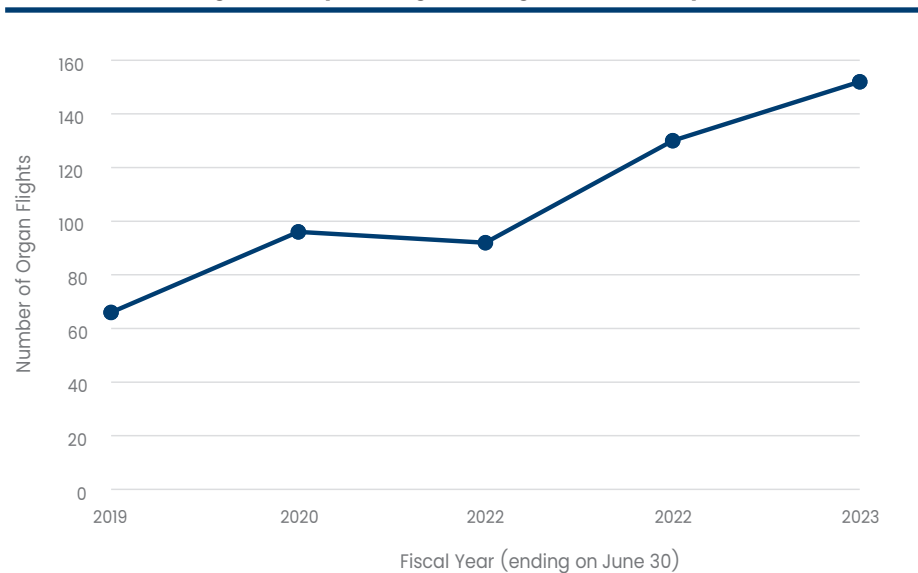
Supporting Organ Transplants

Another important aspect of LEX is its support of the University of Kentucky’s (UK) organ transplant program. The UK Transplant Center is the largest of three transplant facilities in Kentucky. The other two facilities are in Louisville. According to Melinda Fox, transplant administrator for the UK Transplant Center, the program averages approximately 200 organ transplants annually, and 80 percent of those organs pass through LEX on the way to the hospital. These transplants cover all the solid transplants—hearts, lungs, livers, pancreas, and kidneys—and include double organ transplants. The UK Transplant Center also takes credit for the most donor organs in Kentucky. By volume, Fox said it is among the top 25 percent of transplant centers in the U.S.

Bethany Banks, transplant assistant administrator for the Transplant Center, explained that time is critical for organ transplants. Typically, hearts and lungs must be transplanted within six hours of recovery, while liver and pancreas transplants are completed within 12 hours of recovery. Kidneys are the most resilient organ, able to live up to 36 hours once donated.

In the past, Banks said, the time factor limited the availability of viable organs to those close enough to benefit the recipient. However, with advancements in technology and a shift in how organs are allocated nationally, the pool of viable organs expanded, but the time factor remained the same. As a result, the UK Transplant Center has increased its use of aviation, particularly LEX, over time. As shown in **Figure 12**, the number of organ transplant flights using LEX since fiscal year 2019 has risen more than 130 percent, surpassing 150 flights in fiscal year 2023.

Figure 12:
Organ Transplant Flights Using Blue Grass Airport



Source: UK Transplant Center

Charter flights are frequently used to transport organs because their on-demand services address the time factor that is so critical in transplant operations. Charter flights also provide adequate space, which is often needed when the medical recovery team accompanies the organ during the flight. On occasions, these charter flights are forced by weather conditions to divert to a general aviation airport. Medical teams consistently prefer LEX over these general aviation airports because they are not as conveniently located to UK facilities as LEX.

The UK Transplant Center also makes use of commercial airline flights into LEX. Since kidneys can last up to 36 hours after removal from the donor, it is not unusual for these organs to be flown as belly cargo on commercial airline flights.

In short, LEX is a key component of the healthcare system in the Lexington area. Without LEX, the hospitals of Lexington would not be able to provide several of the organ transplant services currently available and medical helicopter flights would suffer a degradation in service. This clearly illustrates the unique value that Blue Grass Airport provides to the people of Lexington and the surrounding area.

Summary

Blue Grass Airport is a significant contributor to the economy of Lexington and central Kentucky. This study has demonstrated that LEX directly supports 2,868 jobs, with an associated payroll of more than \$107 million. As shown in **Table 21**, when multiplier impacts are included, more than 4,700 jobs are tied to LEX and its related activities. Those jobs have a payroll of nearly \$180 million and generate an economic output exceeding \$700 million.

Table 21:
Blue Grass Airport Total Economic Impacts

| Impact Type | Employment | Payroll | Output |
|----------------------|--------------|----------------------|----------------------|
| Direct Impacts | 2,868 | \$107,433,000 | \$422,133,000 |
| Multiplier Impacts | 1,877 | \$72,399,000 | \$286,861,000 |
| Total Impacts | 4,745 | \$179,832,000 | \$708,994,000 |

Source: Mead & Hunt

Beyond these quantifiable impacts, Blue Grass Airport contributes beneficially to the lives of the people of Kentucky through qualitative impacts. Several of these benefits were illustrated through the case studies highlighting how LEX supports the community, including hosting Honor Flights, providing critical assistance to healthcare services, and serving as a launching pad for future aviators.

This all points to the fact that Blue Grass Airport is one of Kentucky's most valuable assets and will continue contributing to the economic development of the region.