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Manitoba medical volunteers forced to travel long road home after U.S. flight stop

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By: Chris Kitching
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About 40 Manitoba health-care workers took a long, unexpected detour home from a medical humanitarian mission in Nicaragua over the weekend, after getting caught up in flight chaos in the U.S.

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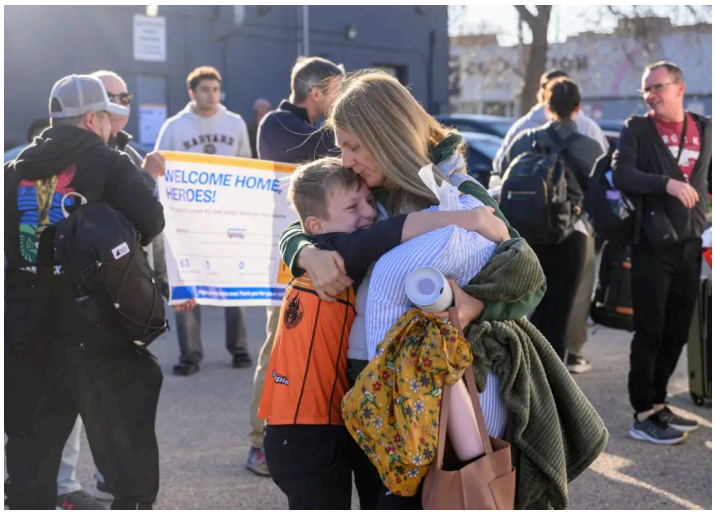
The group, which was scheduled to fly back to Winnipeg via multiple connecting cities, ended up chartering a bus from Houston to avoid being potentially stranded for days after flights within the U.S. were grounded for more than four hours Friday.

“It was actually reassuring that there were so many of us together. We kind of all grouped together and figured out a way to get home,” Dr. Laurel Grant, who specializes in anesthesiology, said while clutching a pillow and belongings after stepping off the bus outside Continental Travel Group’s office, at 1345 Portage Ave., on Sunday afternoon.



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Operation Walk volunteer Megan Silcox hugs her son, Greyson, outside of the Continental Travel Group’s Portage Avenue office Sunday afternoon after a roughly 27-hour journey via chartered bus as a result of the grounding of flights across the U.S. that occurred on Friday.

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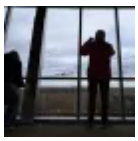

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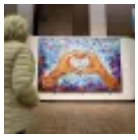

'It’s crazy': Travellers, airlines report busy day at airports after U.S. flight stop


US air travel should normalize Sunday after ground stop triggers mass cancellations, FAA says


Trump administration blames ‘overloaded’ systems for ground stop after FAA lets flights resume


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The weary travellers were greeted by family members, following the roughly 27-hour journey, including stops.

“It was long. Really, really long. Thank goodness for the bus drivers who drove all night,” Grant said.

The group was among almost 70 health-care workers who travelled to Nicaragua, a Central American country that borders Costa Rica and Honduras, for Operation Walk Manitoba, a registered charity that is part of an umbrella international organization.

The volunteers provided free hip and knee replacement surgeries to impoverished patients, who face limited access to orthopedic care, during the weeklong mission in Nicaragua’s capital of Managua.

They were scheduled to return to Winnipeg in three smaller groups before the U.S. Federal Aviation Administration ordered a nationwide ground stop Friday amid intermittent air traffic communications and radar gaps.

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MIKE SUDOMA / FREE PRESS
Joke luggage tags were created to commemorate the flight delay from Operation Walk's annual trip.

Officials later said the U.S. air traffic control system became overloaded while a contractor replaced a section of old copper wire with a new fiber wire. The root cause is under investigation.

One of the Winnipeg-bound groups flew back as scheduled via El Salvador and Toronto with a non-U.S. airline. The two others were stuck in Houston while their flights — one to Chicago and the other to Houston — were grounded and then cancelled.

Dr. Eric Bohm, an orthopedic surgeon at Concordia Hospital and a professor of surgery at the University of Manitoba, helped to organize the charter bus. He was part of the first group that made it home as

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"With all these (flight) cancellations, it takes days to sort out so we decided it's best to just charter a bus. At least you have some predictability about when you're going to get home," Bohm said.

Many volunteers, who included nurses, physiotherapists and support staff, are scheduled to return to work Monday. They were eager to return home to their families, Bohm said.



MIKE SUDOMA / FREE PRESS
Volunteers from Operation Walk were greeted by signs welcoming them back from their unexpected detour home from a medical humanitarian mission in Nicaragua.

Holding a pillow and a plastic shopping bag containing snacks, Franz Lopez-Videla, who served as a translator during the trip in Spanish-speaking Nicaragua, thanked those who arranged the bus ride.

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He learned of the ground stop during the flight from Manuaga to Houston.

“We got nervous because we were in the air when we got the news. We were scared we wouldn’t be able to land in the U.S., and then to figure out a way home,” Lopez-Videla said.

“The only thing you can control is your attitude. If you have a positive attitude, anything can happen.”

Grant said she read a lot of books and watched Netflix during the bus ride. Conversations and humour helped get the travellers through the ordeal between whatever sleep they could get in their seats.



MIKE SUDOMA / FREE PRESS
Operation Walk co-leader Eric Bohm writes up “Welcome Back” cards for the returning volunteers.

Two drivers from a Houston-area

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For Grant, it was her third time helping patients in Nicaragua with Operation Walk Manitoba.

“Each year it gets better and better. It’s great working with everyone on the team and seeing people get their mobility back,” she said.

The charity, which relies on donations, works in partnership with a teaching hospital and local health-care workers in Managua.

Airlines, meanwhile, continued to catch up on the backlog Sunday caused by thousands of earlier flight cancellations. Some passengers who were stranded Friday were eventually rebooked on flights that do not depart until Tuesday or Wednesday.

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MIKE SUDOMA / FREE PRESS
Operation Walk volunteers gather their belongings after a long bus ride back to Winnipeg.

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Chris Kitching

Reporter

Chris Kitching is a general assignment reporter at the *Free Press*. He began his newspaper career in 2001, with stops in Winnipeg, Toronto and London, England, along the way. After returning to Winnipeg, he joined the *Free Press* in 2021, and now covers a little bit of everything for the newspaper. Read more about Chris

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