

# Rodney Colón â?? President, GMD Airline Services

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What truly sets Puerto Rico apart is the competence and determination of its people.

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*From its origins as a modest logistics firm in 1982, GMD Airline Services has grown into a critical enabler of Puerto Ricoâ??s pharmaceutical and medical device supply chain. At the intersection of ground handling, cold chain operations, and air cargo connectivity, GMDâ??s evolution reflects the broader shifts in the islandâ??s strategic positioning. With the company now preparing to double its cold storage capacity and deepen its role in global trans-shipment, President Rodney Colón outlines a vision shaped by precision, resilience, and an unwavering belief in local capability.*

## **How has GMD Airline Services evolved since its founding, and what role does it play in Puerto Ricoâ??s air cargo landscape today?**

GMD Airline Services was founded in 1982 by my father, Carlos C. Guzman, as a small, locally owned logistics firm representing several US mainland freight forwarders in Puerto Rico. Initially focused on managing import and export flows, the company quickly began to expand its scope. Within a few years, we transitioned into an indirect air cargo carrier, operating charter flights between San Juan and the US and British Virgin Islands. This pivot marked our departure from conventional logistics and our entry into the air transport space.

Roughly six years later, GMD underwent another strategic shift, this time becoming a ground handling company. That transformation positioned us to support both cargo-only and passenger

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airlines; today, we represent several major international carriers, including United Airlines, Iberia, Cargolux, and Air Canada.

Although we are not an airline ourselves, we serve as an operational extension of the carriers we represent. When freight forwarders — often serving pharmaceutical manufacturers — deliver cargo to our facility, they are in effect delivering it directly to the airline. We oversee the cargo acceptance process and manage all handling activities on their behalf. This integrated, end-to-end role reflects the evolution of GMD over more than four decades: from a modest logistics operation into a key link in Puerto Rico's pharmaceutical and air freight supply chain. Having grown up in this environment, deeply immersed in the cargo business, it's a legacy I am proud to carry forward.

### **How has GMD responded to the evolving demands of pharmaceutical logistics, and what role has the CEIV Pharma certification played in strengthening your position?**

Adapting to the increasingly complex requirements of pharmaceutical logistics has been a progressive and deliberate effort for us. As we began supporting airlines that carried pharmaceutical and medical device cargo, it became essential to align with their specialised handling standards. Each carrier brought its own protocols and training, which we systematically adopted, building our internal expertise step by step.

The pivotal moment came when GMD achieved CEIV Pharma certification from the International Air Transport Association. This recognition not only validated our operational standards in handling temperature-sensitive shipments, but also marked our transition from a behind-the-scenes service provider to a visible and credible voice within Puerto Rico's life sciences logistics ecosystem. Prior to certification, discussions in this space typically centred on manufacturers, regulatory agencies, and airlines; ground handlers like us were rarely at the forefront.

Today, that has changed. The certification has elevated our standing across the industry, instilling greater confidence in our capabilities among pharmaceutical stakeholders, including companies like Johnson & Johnson. It has also affirmed our readiness to manage cold chain operations in full compliance with global benchmarks, an essential differentiator in a sector where precision and reliability are non-negotiable. Ultimately, it has allowed GMD not just to participate in, but to help shape the future of pharmaceutical logistics on the island.

### **What sets GMD apart in Puerto Rico's cold chain logistics landscape, particularly in comparison to other certified players?**

GMD holds a unique position in Puerto Rico's logistics ecosystem by operating not as a conventional freight forwarder or third-party logistics provider, but as the appointed ground handler for major international airlines. Our core function is to represent major air carriers, overseeing every stage of cargo handling from acceptance through to aircraft loading. This direct airline representation allows us to deliver a level of integration and control that distinguishes us from other actors in the space.

A central component of our value proposition is the CEIV Pharma certification, which demonstrates our compliance with globally recognised standards for the handling of temperature-sensitive pharmaceutical and medical device shipments. For our partners, this translates into confidence, not only in our infrastructure, but in the consistency and rigour of our operations.

What further differentiates us is the end-to-end continuity we offer. From the moment a forwarder delivers cargo to our facility, we manage the entire process, including cold storage, ramp handling, and aircraft transfer, ensuring minimal handovers and full traceability. As a designated transit point,

our facility also handles both inbound and outbound flows, receiving cargo from logistics companies like ETH Cargo or Prime Air for export, and releasing imports delivered via the airlines we serve. This level of operational integration enables us to provide efficient, secure, and seamless cold chain solutions that are increasingly vital to Puerto Rico's pharmaceutical supply chain.

### **How does GMD ensure operational excellence across its service areas, and what role does technology play in supporting your pharmaceutical logistics operations?**

Maintaining consistently high standards across our core service lines requires a culture of continuous oversight and accountability. At GMD, this is anchored by our internal quality control team, which oversees regular performance audits. These include not only the internal reviews required for maintaining our CEIV Pharma certification, but also independent audits conducted by each of our airline partners. Carriers such as Iberia, United Airlines, and Air Canada typically audit us at least twice per year, meaning we operate in a near-constant state of quality assessment. This frequency reinforces a mindset of discipline and continuous improvement across all operational touchpoints.

An important nuance in our business is that, for many stakeholders, cargo handled at our facility is perceived as being in the custody of the airline, not GMD. As for example, when a shipment is delivered, the forwarder sees United Airlines or Iberia, not the ground handler. That level of brand representation demands precision and consistency, as our performance directly reflects on the carriers we serve.

In terms of technology, our responsibility is focused on maintaining the integrity of cargo while it remains under our care. Our post-storage facility is equipped with continuous environmental monitoring to ensure temperature-sensitive shipments are kept within strict parameters. Broader innovations such as real-time tracking or automation are typically managed by the airlines themselves. Our role is to ensure that, within our facility, every shipment is safeguarded with the same rigour and reliability that the pharmaceutical sector expects. In that sense, we complement, not duplicate, the digital systems deployed by our partners while reinforcing the overall strength of the cold chain.

### **How is public-private collaboration shaping Puerto Rico's position as a logistics and trans-shipment hub, and what has been the practical effect of the DOT waiver?**

The establishment of Puerto Rico's air cargo community has been a vital development in advancing the island's role within global logistics. For years, there was a notable gap, a lack of a unified platform bringing together all relevant stakeholders. The formation of this community, which now includes government agencies, manufacturers, airlines, freight forwarders, and handlers like GMD, has created a more coordinated and cohesive environment. Regular dialogue between these groups has not only improved day-to-day operations but also strengthened the island's strategic alignment around shared goals.

A key milestone in this transformation was the 2020 waiver granted by the US Department of Transportation (DOT), which authorises Puerto Rico to serve as an international air cargo and passenger trans-shipment hub. This exemption allows foreign carriers to transfer cargo between aircraft on the island, even if that cargo is not destined for the US mainland. While this policy shift has broadened the island's potential, its full impact depends on a parallel increase in local manufacturing output. Infrastructure and regulatory flexibility are in place, but they must be matched by production volumes that justify expanded air connectivity.

Today, Puerto Rico has substantial capacity. Major passenger airlines such as American Airlines, Delta Air Lines, United Airlines, and Iberia operate widebody aircraft with significant cargo space,

while cargo-only carriers including FedEx, UPS, Amerijet, Cargolux and Air Canada maintain regular routes. Amazon Air, now active in the export segment, operates multiple daily flights from San Juan. With this level of service already in place, the island's next step is clear: to scale up manufacturing in order to fully leverage its logistical infrastructure and realise the long-term promise of its trans-shipment status.

**From your perspective, what are the principal challenges and opportunities currently shaping Puerto Rico's logistics sector, particularly in relation to life sciences?**

The most pressing challenge, especially for the life sciences sector, remains the reliability of Puerto Rico's electrical infrastructure. For industries like medical devices, where production processes are sensitive and precision is paramount, inconsistent power supply creates considerable risk. While many longstanding manufacturers on the island have adapted over the years through experience, resilience, and creative workarounds, this issue continues to be a major obstacle when it comes to attracting new investment. Without meaningful improvements to the power grid, it will be difficult to sustain long-term sectoral growth.

At the same time, there are significant developments that point to a more promising future. For the first time, Puerto Rico will offer an associate degree in engineering in supply chain and logistics, developed through collaboration with private-sector partners such as Saltchuk and two local universities. This marks a pivotal shift, formalising logistics as a recognised professional path and creating a structured pipeline of talent to support the evolving needs of the industry. It reflects a forward-looking approach to workforce development that aligns with the island's ambitions in global trade and supply chain management.

Another defining strength of Puerto Rico's logistics ecosystem is its culture of collaboration. Despite commercial competition, stakeholders – whether manufacturers, logistics providers, or ground handlers – are able to engage constructively, identify shared challenges, and move toward joint solutions. This cooperative spirit is deeply rooted in the island's business culture, where longstanding relationships and mutual familiarity enable agile decision-making and collective progress. Where logistics conversations once centred mainly on airlines and government, today they involve a far more integrated community. Through the Puerto Rico Life Sciences Air Cargo Community, all key players, whether it be manufacturers, handlers, carriers, and public institutions, are aligned behind a shared goal: to position Puerto Rico as a serious, high-standard logistics alternative on the global stage. And that goal is increasingly within reach.

It is this combination of resilience, investment in human capital, and collaborative mindset that continues to shape Puerto Rico's value proposition as a life sciences and logistics hub.

**What is your vision for GMD's growth beyond 2025, and how will your upcoming infrastructure expansion contribute to Puerto Rico's logistics and life sciences ecosystem?**

Looking ahead, our focus is on expanding capacity to better serve the increasing needs of the pharmaceutical and medical device industries we support. We are currently finalising architectural plans for a new, state-of-the-art cold storage facility, which will add 20,000 square feet of temperature-controlled space to our operations. Scheduled for completion by mid-2026, the facility will feature 15 loading bays and individually managed chambers capable of maintaining temperatures between 2°C and 25°C, offering the flexibility to accommodate a wide range of product requirements.

This expansion is not speculative, it is a response to clear persistent demand. As the ground handling partner for several major international airlines transporting temperature-sensitive cargo, we

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are frequently required to lease additional storage just to meet daily volume. Our current chambers, spread across various parts of the warehouse, present operational inefficiencies. Centralising cold storage within a single, purpose-built facility will enhance control, improve throughput, and allow us to manage cargo with greater precision.

Our geographic positioning is another advantage. The warehouse is directly connected to the ramp where cargo carriers such as Cargolux and Air Canada operate, allowing us to transfer shipments swiftly and securely between storage and aircraft. The terminal, located just a mile away, provides easy access for both inbound and outbound flows. This level of integration, from airside access to dedicated cold chain handling, reinforces our value not only to the airlines we represent but also to Puerto Rico's broader ambition of becoming a premier logistics and life sciences hub.

### **As the leader of a multigenerational business, what personally drives your commitment to GMD's current transformation?**

What motivates me most is seeing the distance we've travelled. When my father launched GMD in 1982, it was a small operation, just two employees. Today, we've grown into a team of over 1,000, and cargo now accounts for around 40 percent of our activity. That progression speaks to his vision and the values that shaped the company from the beginning.

The cold storage expansion currently underway is the most important initiative we've pursued in recent years. It represents more than an operational upgrade, it is a strategic response to the evolving needs of the pharmaceutical and medical device sectors. For us, this project is not only about positioning GMD for the future; it's about contributing meaningfully to Puerto Rico's ambition of becoming a globally recognised life sciences logistics hub. Being part of that momentum, and building something that serves both our company and the broader ecosystem, is what makes this phase of our journey so meaningful.

### **What impact has talent migration had on your sector, and how can local industry help address it?**

The issue of talent retention affects not only healthcare and sales but also the logistics sector. Like many others, we've experienced the broader consequences of population outflow to the mainland, which stem from a combination of job scarcity after the loss of key manufacturing operations and the impact of natural disasters in recent years.

The solution lies in rebuilding local opportunity. Expanding manufacturing would create the kind of stable, well-compensated roles that encourage people to stay, and bring back those who left. For manufacturers, this could mean a more robust, sustainable talent pipeline. For service providers like GMD, while the challenge remains, increased industrial activity helps strengthen the ecosystem overall and creates a more compelling case for professionals to build long-term careers on the island.

### **What message would you like to share with the international community about Puerto Rico's logistics potential?**

Puerto Rico is not just a destination, it is a strategically located logistics hub with the infrastructure, talent, and commitment to serve complex, high-value industries. In the pharmaceutical and medical device space, we operate to standards that are fully aligned with leading global markets. Although challenges remain, particularly around energy stability, the island continues to prove its capacity to deliver. What truly sets Puerto Rico apart is the competence and determination of its people, who consistently find ways to maintain high performance despite external constraints.

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