



**Akiem Hicks**  
Credit: Chicago Bears Football Club



# AIR CHICAGO

## HICKS

BY DEBBIE EMERY

The history of the Chicago Bears defense is long and illustrious — from the unstoppable force of the 1985 Super Bowl XX champions under defensive lineman, William “Refrigerator” Perry, who only allowed 198 total points all season, to eight-time Pro Bowl linebacker Brian Urlacher, who was voted into the 2018 Pro Football Hall of Fame.

Going into his third year with the Bears, defensive end Akiem Hicks is gearing up for potentially his best season ever after recording a career-high of seven sacks in 2017 — and he is determined to bring Chicago’s Defense back to its former greatness.

“It’s been exciting knowing where we were last year as a Top 10 defense, and knowing that if we keep everything together and just chip away at some of the things we didn’t make plays on, how much better we’re going to be this year,” Hicks told *Air Chicago*.

“The history with the Bears having a tenacious, nasty, aggressive defense is something that the city will never let us forget. We’ve got to remember that we’re not only building our legacy, but we’re continuing the legacy that the Bears have established over the years.”

Along with the return of dominating starters such as cornerback Kyle Fuller, the Bears defensive corps was strengthened in the offseason with the addition of first-round draft pick Roquan Smith, and Hicks likes what he sees from the rookie linebacker so far.

“He is such a fast learner and he’s so willing to pick up things and be in the right place — that only propels his talent because he’s already such a talented athlete,” he said of Smith.

As for 28-year-old Hicks, his career path has been rich with rewards but not without its challenges. His unlikely road to the NFL began at University Regina in Saskatchewan, Canada, when recruiting violations by the LSU coaching staff prevented him from playing college football for the Tigers. Instead, he got a job at a DirecTV call center to make ends meet before going north of the border to earn a college degree and join the Regina Rams, where he became the Canada West Universities Athletic Association’s top lineman.

After being picked by the New Orleans Saints in the third round of the 2012 NFL Draft, Hicks went to play for the New England Patriots. Their 2015 team came within a game of going to the Super Bowl when they fell to Peyton Manning’s Denver Broncos in the AFC Championship game with a final score of 20-18.

Despite the Patriots’ history-making comeback to win Super Bowl LI the following year after he’d left the team, Hicks has never regretted leaving New England and signing with the Bears in March 2016.

“Chicago was the right fit because I felt... whereas the Patriots already established where they were and what they were going to be, this was an opportunity for me to go to a team that was building — and wanted to build — the type of franchise that the city could be proud of,” he said. “So knowing that we have such a good base here, I was excited to come in and build this defense and bring us to a point where we can win playoff games and Super Bowls.”

Bears General Manager and former Saints director of personnel, Ryan Pace, “is one of the people who originally drafted me to New Orleans, so that was a great reconnection. I was just honored that he looked back and said ‘this is a guy that I brought into the league’ and wanted me to come here to help build his defense once again.”

Having grown up in San Jose, California, and having played in Canada, New Orleans, and New England during his career, Hicks is now happy to call the Windy City his home for the long haul.

“I love this city. The thing about Chicago is there’s always something going on, even when it’s freezing out here, there [are] people out having good dinners and just enjoying it. Everybody’s going somewhere and there’s always something to do,” said Hicks, who lives in Lake Forest but spends a lot of his spare time downtown. “I want to retire a Chicago Bear. One day I would love to get a condo in the heart of the city and just be able to take it in every day.”

At 6-foot-5 and 330 pounds, Hicks isn’t embarrassed to admit that he loves to eat. “One of my favorite restaurants in the city is Maple & Ash because of the environment, the ambiance — it’s just such a great place. And then the food on top of that is spectacular,” he gushed. “The steak is always cooked to perfection. RPM Steak is another

great steakhouse — as you can see I like red meat! Tavern on Rush is phenomenal too.”

Aside from taking out-of-town guests for a filet at Maple & Ash, Hicks likes to give them the full downtown tour. “You’ve got to take them to see the sights. We usually go up to the top of the John Hancock building for brunch at the Signature Room on the 95th floor,” he said.

“I like to go out to the pier every once in a while, too, or just walk along the lake in the summer,” he continued. “There’s great boating. I went out on a boat for Memorial Day weekend this year and the environment was amazing, everybody’s out there enjoying [the lake]. When people first come here and if they’re not too sound on their geography, then they think we have an ocean!”

Dating back to 1924, Soldier Field is part of Chicago’s history in its own right and a tourist destination for thousands of visitors each year either for games or behind-the-scenes tours. It may be Hicks’ workplace during the regular NFL season (the Bears preseason training camp is in Bourbonnais, Illinois), but that doesn’t mean he takes it for granted, telling first-time visitors “just take in the atmosphere and history because it’s such a beautiful structure from the moment you pull up. Then, as soon as you leave the stadium you’re right in the heart of the city.

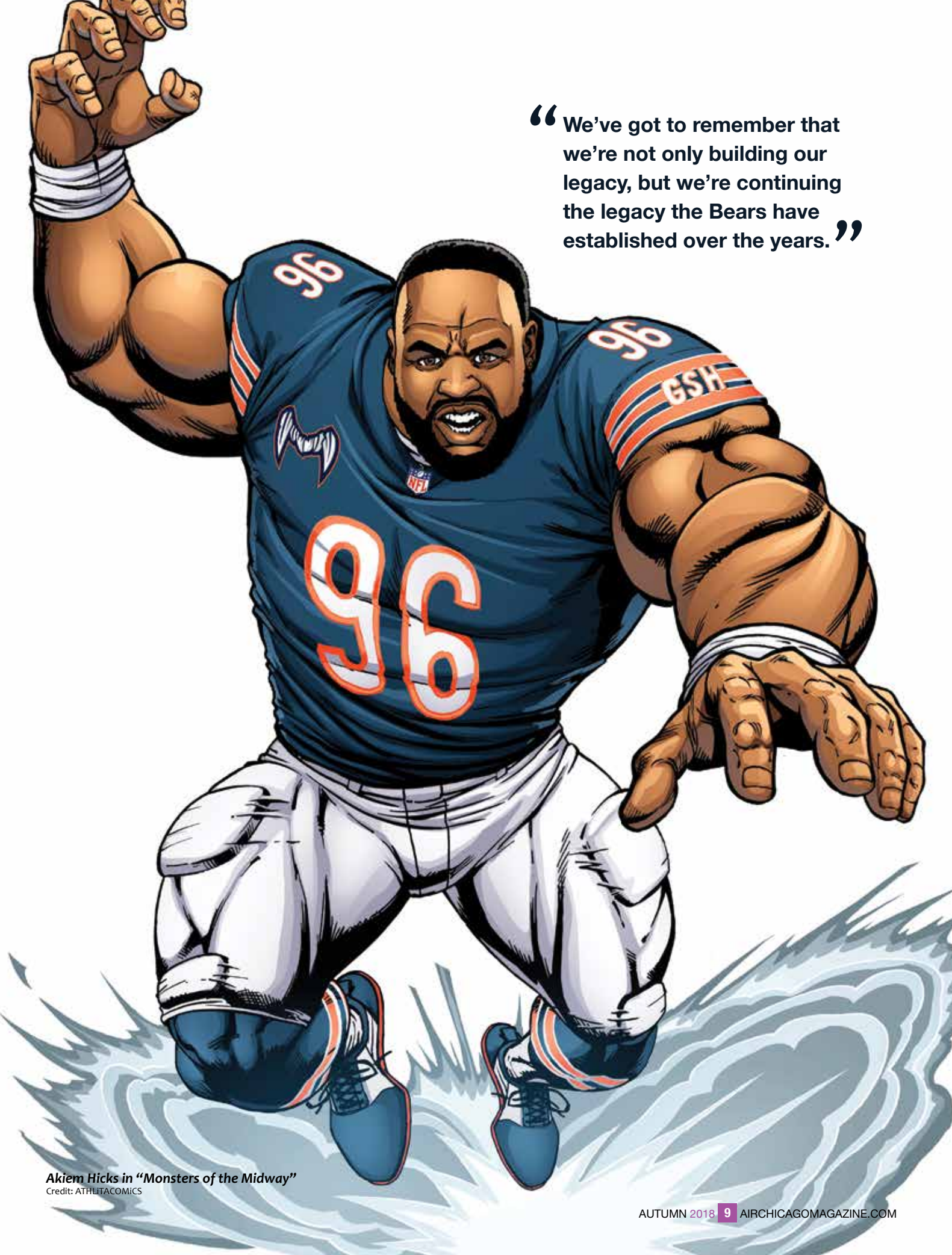
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“I had my dad here recently and it was his first time in Chicago. We were driving by the stadium and I said, ‘Dad, that’s where I work,’ and he’s like ‘WOW.’ Just looking at the architecture and how it’s built, he was impressed,” Hicks recalled.

Hicks had the opportunity to enjoy Soldier Field as a fan himself for Argentina’s Copa America victory over Panama in July 2016. “I got to see Lionel Messi play there. He didn’t come out until probably half way through the game [in the 63rd minute] and then scored three goals. It was so impressive,” he marveled. “The stadium was full of soccer fans, right? You would’ve thought a Bears game was going on! It was nice to be able to sit in the stands and see it how the fans see it versus being on the field.” Hicks said he was surprised by how close he was to the players, “because when you’re on the field, everything seems so far away. And when you sit in the stands, it feels like there’s not a bad seat in the house — like you’re right up on the game,” he explained. “That’s the beautiful thing about our stadium: it’s kind of old school in that regard compared to other stadiums where you seem further away from the ball and the action.”

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Akiem Hicks in “Monsters of the Midway”  
Credit: ATHLETACOMICS



Along with enjoying the best that Chicago has to offer, from dining to sports, Hicks also works to make the city a better place for everyone through community development programs. “Every year, I do a back-to-school drive where we give out backpacks and school supplies,” he told *Air Chicago*. “That’s an area that I really enjoy — working with kids — and it’s something I’ve done since I’ve been in the NFL.”

Already a hero to countless kids, Hicks and his fellow Bears starters recently became comic book superheroes as part of the “Monsters of the Midway” campaign created by former player and ATHLETICOMICS founder Israel Idonije. Each “Monster” has his own unique powers playing off his natural skill set as a football player. The vision was to create an alternate world where the “Monsters of the Midway” defend the City of Chicago from a weekly nemesis on the Bears’ 2018 schedule, and the characters will transition from the comic world into reality as the outcome is played out on the field each game day.

When he’s not playing football, or giving back to the community, Hicks likes to take advantage of the proximity of O’Hare International Airport and travel, himself. “One of my favorite spots that I... also live in is Miami so I go back there every year, and to California frequently, where I’m from,” he said. “I also love New Orleans because of the environment and the food (I’m a big eater!). There’s always something good to drink and great food on your plate — it’s an awesome city.”

When it comes to bucket list travel destinations, however, Hicks has his sights set much further afield. “I really want to see Australia. I think I just fell in love with the accent. I want to see Sydney, but

I would love to go to all of it especially the Outback. I want to do everything.” Well, not quite everything. “I don’t want to check out the crocodiles or anything,” he laughed. You can’t really avoid them ... “How about snakes?” Yep, those too. “I’m a big fan of that movie from back in the day, *Crocodile Dundee*.” While he may not be wrestling crocodiles or shark-diving anytime soon, Hicks is an “adventurous guy” when he travels. “Even when I’m relaxing, I find a way to get outdoors and do something of interest, whether it be a hike or various other things.”

Any international vacation plans are going to have to wait until after the NFL season is over though, as Hicks and the rest of the Bears are solidly focused on the challenges closer to home (especially those at Lambeau Field against the Packers). “Green Bay is always the first game that you get excited for when you put it on your calendar, because if you’re going to beat anybody, you’ve got to beat them,” he said of their rivals 200 miles to the north led by six-time Pro Bowl quarterback Aaron Rodgers.

To literally be able to tackle such strong opponents for years to come, at this stage in his career Hicks is focused on his training and recovery programs off the field, as well as his performance on it. “You want to make sure you’re capable and available to play all 16 regular season games and that your body is in the position to endure them all and be able to play out the whole season just as strong as you started it,” he explained. “For me, what really helps is yoga. I focus on stretching and making sure that everything is up to par. I’m a big guy, I can move people and be the strongest guy on the field, so I like to work on my weaknesses. Just making sure I’m flexible is



a big key to my success. I always harp on younger guys because they don't know the values of [flexibility]."

"It's great to be able to lift in the gym and run a mile, but can you bend and get your body in the positions that you need to be effective? When I was younger, I just thought I could go out there and let it fly. But Father Time always catches up with you," he said.

Hicks is a regular at Forever Om studio in Lake Forest, "I do a lot of hot yoga. When you're in the class and it's starting to weigh on you and you feel like 'man, I just want to go into child's pose and have a seat,' you've got people around to motivate you. The funniest part about my class is that I'm always the biggest guy in there, so you have these little old ladies and they're watching to see if I can get into certain positions," he laughed. "They're really great at cheering you on when they see you're struggling, they're like 'oh, come on Akiem, you can finish this out.'" While he can't do all the handstands and backbends, "I know what I'm there for and I'm going to get the best I can out of it."

"It definitely gets your mind right, because if you can make it through a class where it's 102 degrees, you can definitely make it through a summer practice. And because of the temperature, your muscles start loosening up already, and you can find yourself getting into deeper poses. Then when I come out of the class and get on the field, I can feel myself go into that lower point — whether I'm doing a squat or trying to come off the ball — I can feel my knees and my hips are a little bit looser."

Akiem Hicks  
Credit: United Airlines





# TRAVEL



# wellness

BY DEBBIE EMERY

Travel can bring endless joy and new experiences, but it can also throw many of us off our healthy eating, exercise, and sleep schedules. Often this is accentuated for business travelers who exchange rest for flying cross country for meetings. Even recreational travel can involve layovers and multiple time zones.

To learn how to make travel healthier for both the body and the mind, *Air Chicago* spoke with Dr. Zelana Montminy, a renowned wellness architect, positive psychologist, and author of *21 Days to Resilience: How to Transcend the Daily Grind, Deal with the Tough Stuff, and Discover Your Strongest Self*.

Dr. Montminy believes that in seeking true happiness, we often make ourselves even more stressed out. Instead, we should shift to practicing the skills needed that result in enduring resilience — seeing challenges as opportunities and discovering emotional strength during times of struggle.

To combat the challenges of business travel, Dr. Montminy advises finding a routine that is both sustaining and comforting, and to fuel yourself with nutritious wholesome choices throughout. You may not be thinking of it when grabbing the nearest food option on a short layover, but a healthy diet is essential to the overall travel experience and will benefit your mental as well as physical health.

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“Travel involves a lot of movement, and when you’re running on empty — or on sugar that will make you inevitably crash — you’re setting yourself up for a challenging travel experience,” Dr. Montminy told *Air Chicago*. “What you feed your body is how you’re going to feel, and when you feel strong and healthy, you can think better and have more stable moods.” So yes — that means choosing healthy food in the terminal could impact your performance in the important executive meeting at your destination.

Fortunately, there are healthy options available at airports thanks to concessionaires such as HMSHost and OTG who offer fresh salads, Paleo meals, and protein-rich snacks that are quick food but not “fast food.” This is “critical to improve the travel experience,” Dr. Montminy said. “I used to only pack food from home when I traveled because there were such limited healthy options in airports, but with HMSHost’s new program to increase wellness, we have choices that are fast and sustaining. Quick options are important because, unless you’re delayed, travel is often a fairly rushed experience that usually pushes consumers to make unhealthy choices because that’s the only thing available.”

Flying and airport visits can be stressful — but eating a well-balanced meal can actually counteract that more efficiently than what most people would normally consider comfort food.

“Comfort food is ‘comforting’ because it triggers memories of our past like enjoying ice cream with your dad for example,” Dr. Montminy explained. “It can also be a social experience that increases connectivity,” such as sharing a plate of nachos with a friend. And while eating foods high in bad fats, sugar, and salt activates the brain’s reward system, the satisfaction “doesn’t last and leads to all sorts of negative consequences long term,” she said.

“When we switch to conscious, healthful eating versus the emotional, unhealthy eating people defer to during stress, it counteracts those crashes we often experience quickly after feeling ‘good’ by giving us the wholesome nutrition our body needs to weather the daily grind and keep us going and thinking clearly.”

Travelers need to make healthy eating a conscious choice. Like many things in life, the first step is “awareness, and then planning to find better solutions,” Dr. Montminy advised. “Look in advance at the terminal offerings and make a choice of where to go that’s healthier before arriving at the airport...and then stick to it,” she said. Also, packing healthy snacks like a bag of nuts and seeds from home in your carry-on will mean you don’t arrive hungry.

While a healthier travel experience will impact your short-term performance, it can also lead to better “long-term mental, physical, and spiritual health,” according to Dr. Montminy.

So before you set out on that next business trip, think about planning your meals in advance. “Know if you’ll be eating on the plane or in a terminal, plus bring two to three healthy snacks from home,” Dr. Montminy said. Activity is also important, so remember to breathe and stretch. “Make sure to move your body to avoid sitting for too long of a period,” she added.



**Dr. Zelana Montminy**



**Paleo Lunch Box**  
Credit: HMSHost



**Vegan Box**  
Credit: HMSHost



Dr. Zelana Montminy is the author of *21 Days to Resilience: How to Transcend the Daily Grind, Deal with the Tough Stuff, and Discover Your Strongest Self*

## HOW TRAVEL EATING OPTIONS ARE BECOMING HEALTHIER

A growing number of restaurateurs and concessionaires are committed to ensuring that travel and wellness go hand in hand. To that aim, HMSHost has launched a new wellness initiative called *Eat Well. Travel Further* encouraging fliers to opt for nutritious meals and probiotic beverages at the airport. Each of their wholesome salads, snacks (such as RX Bars, organic dried fruit, kale chips, and kombucha), and Paleo or Protein Lunch Boxes have 500 calories or less, plus no artificial colors, flavors, sweeteners, hydrogenated fats, or high fructose corn syrup. Many are also gluten-free and made without genetically modified ingredients. At O'Hare, HMSHost products can be found at Farmers Market, La Tapenade, Ciao, and the newly opened Eat Well. Travel Further kiosk in Terminal L. OTG has also pledged to change the airport experience by serving locally-sourced farm-to-terminal ingredients at their restaurants.

Travelers or airport employees suffering from medical emergencies can visit the **O'Hare Urgent Care Clinic**, which is a joint effort between the University of Illinois at Chicago and the City of Chicago's Department of Aviation, located in Terminal 2. The clinic also offers preventative treatments including diabetes and cholesterol screenings, free blood pressure screenings, immunizations, flu shots, and EKG testing. The clinic is also breaking ground in terms of wellness services, from IV hydration (as dehydration is a major side effect of air travel) and B12 shots to teeth whitening.

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