

Haitian citizens use heavy equipment to clear debris near the presidential palace in Port-au-Prince.



# Help for Haiti

VA joins the relief effort to help the island nation recover from a devastating earthquake.

It's been more than three months since the island nation of Haiti was rocked to its foundation by the devastating 7.0-magnitude earthquake that hit just 15 miles west of the capital, Port-au-Prince.

VA shared with all Americans a sense of shock at the overwhelming destruction and loss of life. Like many nations, organizations and individuals around the world, the Department extended its sympathy and a helping hand.

While the immediate effects of the tectonic tumult (including 59 aftershocks over the next 12 days) were obvious, continuously reported and easy to see, like the tip of an iceberg,

the long-term recovery efforts and the impact on Haiti and its Caribbean neighbors are below the surface and harder to appreciate.

The same was true of the immediate rescue and relief efforts—much of their success depended on the hundreds of hours of planning, coordination, preparation and practice that few see. This was certainly the case for VA.

Many people asked why VA was not doing more. The simple fact is, while VA is prepared to provide significant support, that support must first be requested by another federal agency, such as the Department of Defense or Department of Health and

Human Services; second, it must be part of the coordinated federal effort being handled by the U.S. Agency for International Development ([www.usaid.gov/ht](http://www.usaid.gov/ht)); and third, VA must be reimbursed for that support since VA cannot use appropriated funds for care of non-veterans.

Nevertheless, after the quake was reported, VA moved quickly to identify people and material that could be made available to assist. Hundreds of VA staff with medical and technical skills maintain their readiness to deploy to areas hit by natural disaster or other emergencies. Because of the international nature of this crisis, language facility, passport and vaccina-



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Left: Marie Mompont, Haiti native and nurse practitioner with the Atlanta VA Medical Center, reviews a patient's medical record with the immigration team at Dobbins Air Reserve Base.

Below: VA Caribbean Healthcare System warehouse employee Javier Pastrana lifts a container of medical supplies onto a Puerto Rico Army National Guard truck as Specs. Marian Otero and Jonathan Peraza supervise. The VA Caribbean Healthcare System in San Juan, Puerto Rico, loaded 12 containers of supplies to be airlifted to Haiti. The pallets, which included basic medical supplies, oxygen tanks and pharmaceuticals, came from VA facilities in both Puerto Rico and Florida.



FELIX RODRIGUEZ



THOMAS BROACH

Above: A tent city outside Gheskio Field Hospital, where Thomas Broach, a nurse anesthetist with the VA Central California Healthcare System, was deployed as part of the relief effort. Broach described what he witnessed in Haiti as "surreal apocalyptic devastation" in a region already medically underserved. The retired Army colonel and Vietnam combat veteran was previously deployed with medical units in the Gulf War, Afghanistan, Germany, Kosovo and Iraq.

Right: Dr. Jose L. Lezama, chief of Medical Service at the James A. Haley Veterans' Hospital in Tampa, and Victor L. Ramos, area emergency manager with the Emergency Strategic Health Care Group and National Disaster Medical System coordinator for the Tampa Bay area, discuss the medical triage and transport of Haitian medical parolees, U.S. citizens and active-duty personnel.



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tion status were added criteria.

Within three days of the event, 579 personnel within VA's Disaster Emergency Medical Personnel System (DEMPS) had volunteered for immediate deployment and had been cleared by their supervisors and medical centers to assist as needed.

This information, along with information on 102 personnel possessing specific "critical" specialties, was passed to the Department's DoD and HHS partners during daily conference calls.

One critical skill, beneficial to both clinical staff and Haitian earthquake victims—the ability to speak French or the Creole-based language of Haiti—brought Haitian-born VA nurse practitioner Marie Mompoint to the front lines. She greeted every flight of medical evacuees arriving at Dobbins Air Reserve Base outside Atlanta.

This was the site for one of two Federal Coordinating Centers VA set up and operated, in Atlanta and Tampa, to receive, assess and place quake victims, returning U.S. citizens and military personnel in appropriate medical facilities in the surrounding

communities.

Good working relationships, coordination and communication are essential to successful FCC operation, and the Tampa center benefited from the experience of Jose L. Lezama Jr., M.D., chief of Medical Service at the James A. Haley Veterans' Hospital in Tampa.

Lezama has been serving as the deputy director for Mass Casualty Services in the Hillsborough County Emergency Operations Center since Hurricane Katrina in 2005.

"I have learned what resources I have available in the community to handle disaster situations, including volunteer nurses, local emergency room physicians ... and Tampa International Airport personnel, to name a few," Lezama said. "There cannot be a coordinated federal response ... without the coordinated involvement of multiple community partners in the process."

Together, the two FCCs quickly and efficiently coordinated the placement of 71 Haitian nationals, 16 active-duty service members and seven U.S. citizens. In addition, four other FCC sites, in Boston, Lyons, N.J., New York City and Philadelphia, were alerted and prepared to handle additional victims as needed. The FCCs were deactivated March 5.

In response to a request from the U.S. Southern Command, the VA medical center in San Juan, Puerto Rico, loaded 12 containers with \$50,000 worth of requested medical supplies that were airlifted to Haiti for an Argentinean field hospital set up there. The supplies, which included oxygen tanks and pharmaceuticals, came from various VA medical facilities in Florida as well as San Juan.

Responding to a request from HHS, a VA anesthesiologist who previously worked with a deploying surgical team joined them in Atlanta recently for a chartered flight to the ravaged area. VA supplied a total of five clinical personnel (three anesthesiologists and two surgeons) to provide

support to the surgical team in Haiti.

One of those was Dr. Allison Murray, an anesthesiologist from the North Chicago VA Medical Center and DEMPS volunteer who was able to respond to a short notice request. After her return, Murray was enthusiastic about the efforts of the team.

"My DMAT (Disaster Medical Assistance Team) was absolutely fantastic," she said. "The entire team came together under third-world conditions ... and the Haitian people were clearly thankful for our help."

Another indicator of progress in the recovery effort was marked when VA transferred responsibility for tracking patients who came through the FCCs to the Department of Homeland Security-Citizenship Immigration Services on March 30. DHS-CIS has contracted with Refugee Resettlement and Immigration Services of Atlanta and Catholic Conference of Bishops in Atlanta and Tampa, respectively, to follow these individuals through their recovery process.

Progress, however, does not mean the job is complete. Some experts estimate Haiti's recovery will take five to 10 years.

So how can individual VA employees help? First, if you are not a volunteer for DEMPS but are interested, contact your local DEMPS coordinator and sign up.

Second, if you want to contribute, there are numerous organizations handling contributions for the Haitian Relief Effort. One good place to look is the White House Haiti Earthquake site, at [www.whitehouse.gov/HaitiEarthquake](http://www.whitehouse.gov/HaitiEarthquake), that links to other sites.

Third, continue to support the various non-governmental relief agencies as they work to provide assistance in the months and years ahead.

Finally, keep the Haitian people in your thoughts and remember, this type of event could happen here in this country at any time. Be prepared and ask yourself, "Am I ready?" 

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By Jim Benson

## **A Catastrophic Quake**

The 2010 Haiti earthquake was a catastrophic 7.0-magnitude with an epicenter approximately 15 miles west of Port-au-Prince, Haiti's capital. The earthquake occurred at 4:53 p.m. local time on Jan. 12. By Jan. 24, at least 59 aftershocks measuring 4.5 or greater had been recorded. As of Feb. 12, an estimated 3 million people were affected by the quake; the Haitian government reported that between 217,000 and 230,000 people died, an estimated 300,000 were injured, and an estimated 1 million were left homeless. They also estimated that 250,000 residences and 30,000 commercial buildings had collapsed or were severely damaged.