



Operation Haiti, A Renewal Experience

by Alain Normand

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Emergency Managers used to be called Emergency Planners. A good part of our work is geared to management and planning functions. This often translates into looking at emergencies in terms of statistics. We calculate risks based on probability and impact; again more numbers and altogether a very scientific but impersonal approach.

Then, once in a while, something happens that brings us back to reality. I spent a bit of time last summer helping the Canadian Red Cross with the Vaughan tornado relief effort. It turned out to be a good practice for me to be ready for Operation Haiti.

No, I didn't get to go to Haiti. I went to Dorval, Quebec, at -30°C and blizzard conditions, and stayed there two weeks with the Quebec Civil Protection and the Quebec Division of the Canadian Red Cross. My French background, my training as a disaster relief supervisor with the Red Cross and my emergency management background were considered assets to this operation. The City of Brampton, my employer, seconded me to the Canadian Red Cross for this period.

My role was primarily to coordinate the logistics section from the EOC. Part of this was the supplies and equipment but there was also a function related to transportation. All of this was generally simple for me because once again, it was management, it was emergency planning, and it was what I do on a regular basis.

The true value of this experience for me however, didn't come from handling materials and transportation. It came from dealing with people.

This was an occasion to get away from the statistic and probabilities. Here I dealt with a real situation and with individuals. The statistics were secondary. We did maintain statistics and I can tell you that we helped over 4,800 repatriates from Haiti resettle in Canada. While I was there, approximately 2,000 people came through Dorval in planes and were provided with all sorts of essential services.

What I did however, was spend a lot of time assisting individuals and families. From the time they arrived, we connected with people, wrapping them up in blankets as they came out of the plane in T-shirts, shorts and sandals into the Montreal blizzard. We welcomed them as a group and one-by-one as we discussed their needs. Some of them had family or friends and only needed access to a phone to arrange to be picked up. A few of them had some possession they had managed to gather. The majority, however, had nothing and were here to restart their lives all over.

I was there, as part of the team geared to rebuild people's lives. We gave them food, we lodged them at the hotel for three days, we gave them clothing, and we gave them some money. Then we helped them get health cards, social insurance



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numbers, a place to live, bus passes, and so much more that most of us generally take for granted.

We spent time listening to them and providing some comfort.

This connection brought me back to earth. The emotional roller coaster that comes with providing front line relief is something you can't feel from your office in front of a computer doing statistics and writing plans. Seeing a woman with two children arriving and wondering how she will be feeding her babies, giving her a reference letter for the local food bank and an allowance, then escorting her to a contact with the children's aid society, is a lot more concrete. Having a few volunteers surround a young woman who is constantly in tears because she doesn't know where to start and staying with her as we move her from one support agency to the other, gradually seeing her tears fade and a glimpse of hope light up in her eyes; that's reality, not statistics.

It wasn't all sad either. A middle-aged man was sitting in the lobby of the hotel, waiting. A few people offered help but he refused saying he was waiting for someone. Then, from across the hall a cry came. A woman rushed toward the man, and jumped into his arms. They stayed there crying and holding on to each other for a long time. We thought they'd stay stuck together forever. And we cried tears of joy, for these people had found each other again - alive. This man had a new future but he also had loved ones who would help him through it.

I could tell you many more stories, but the most important is that this experience reminded me why I got into emergency management in the first place. I joined this field to help people affected by disaster. Yes, I've gone back to my desk and I'll continue to write plans and review statistics, but I revived my desire to provide real help to those who are most destitute. Operation Haiti for me was a renewal experience that I will never forget. I strongly encourage all of my colleagues in this field to consider volunteering, at least once in your career, to be on the front line of a disaster. It might just change you.

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