

An exploratory analysis of the process to receive victims of the Haitian earthquake and its impact on immigration in the U.S.

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The U.S. has engaged in a large scale effort to accommodate victims of the January 12, 2010 earthquake in Haiti. While there is extensive literature on the sheltering and housing processes communities engage in during a disaster (Phillips 1992; Quarantelli 1982, 1995), there has been little study on efforts of host cities to provide services to victims of a catastrophe outside a provider's community. In "typical" disasters, the four categories of sheltering and housing (viewed along a continuum) used after a disaster are: emergency sheltering, temporary sheltering, temporary housing, and permanent housing. However, with regard to a catastrophic event, this continuum ceases to be a viable framework to ascertain how victims actually acquire shelter and housing (Nigg et al. 2006). A catastrophic event differs from a disaster in that the majority of built environment is destroyed or severely damaged, local officials are prohibited from carrying out their response phase roles, assistance from nearby communities is unable to be provided, normal everyday functions are severely interrupted, and the global media becomes a tool to socially construct the event (Quarantelli 2005). The level of physical destruction and social disruption occurring after the earthquake in Haiti reveals this to be a catastrophic event. An estimated 250,000 people died and three million were made homeless from this event. The lack of immediate supplies such as food, water, shelter as well as medical attention has been well publicized by global media.

Examining the U.S. repatriation process developing after the January 12, 2010 earthquake in Haiti offers a unique opportunity to study how a host community mobilizes resources to accommodate victims of a catastrophic event. It is estimated that at least 45,000 U.S. citizens were living in Haiti at the time of the earthquake (USDHS 2010a). Florida airports received a little over 20,000 people from Haiti (Operation Haiti Relief 2010), with a reported total of 27,199 American citizens returning to the U.S. (Department of Health and Human Services 2010). The last large scale effort to repatriate U.S. citizens occurred when “hostilities developed between Israel military and Hezbollah guerillas” in Lebanon in July of 2006, and 12,421 “American citizens and others” entered the U.S. between July and August of 2006, also known as the Lebanon Emergency Repatriation (LER) (Department of Health and Human Services 2007; 6). This was considered the “largest U.S. repatriation of Non-combatant American Citizens since World War Two” (Department of Health and Human Services 2007; 6), thus the current process to repatriate U.S. citizens who were victims of the Haiti earthquake is exceptional. There have been assessments performed on the needs of large displaced populations residing in temporary care facilities of a host community, such as with Hurricane Katrina (Brodie et al. 2006; Ghosh et al. 2007; Lein et al. 2009; Rodriguez et al. 2006; Wilson and Stein 2006), yet few studies exist which examine the process to meet the demand of large influx of evacuees (Gavagan et al. 2006; Robinson et al. 2006) by a host community. This current research hopes to offer insight into the repatriation process so that knowledge gained and lessons learned will aid future endeavors in the U.S. and abroad where accommodating a surge of evacuees is an element of disaster response.

Methodology:

A quick response trip to Florida was conducted between February 14 and February 19, 2010. The goal of this research was to conduct exploratory analysis on the repatriation process which developed in Florida after the earthquake in Haiti. Qualitative interviews were conducted with key informants from agencies that had a role in receiving victims of the earthquake as they arrived in Florida. There were several sites in Florida where victims were received after the earthquake (i.e. Orlando Sanford International Airport in Orlando, Miami International Airport and Homestead Air Force Base). Quick response research was conducted at Orlando Sanford International (SFB) to assess how strategies were developed to accommodate the great influx of people arriving from Haiti. A total of six interviews were conducted with key informants of various organizations who had experience with the repatriation process at SFB.

An emerging area of research while in Florida was the Temporary Protected Status (TPS) given to Haitian nationals residing in the U.S. prior to the earthquake in Haiti. On January 15, 2010 the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) announced that Haitian nationals residing in the U.S. as of January 12, 2010 would be granted (if eligible) TPS. Undocumented Haitian nationals receiving TPS would temporarily (for the next 18 months) be prevented from deportation allowing them to work in the U.S. TPS was granted to provide “a temporary refuge for Haitian nationals who are currently in the United States and whose personal safety would be endangered by returning to Haiti” (USDHS 2010a). TPS status has been granted in the past to other foreign nationals residing in the U.S. after a natural hazard has impacted their home country; after Hurricane Mitch (December 30, 1998), many from El Salvador, Honduras and Nicaragua living in U.S. prior to this hazard were granted TPS (Migration News 1999). This is the first time TPS has been extended to the Haitians residing in the U.S. Additionally, on January 18, 2010 DHS also announced a humanitarian parolee program permitting “orphaned

children from Haiti to enter the United States on a individual basis to ensure that they receive the care they need” as a support function to the international disaster response occurring in Haiti (Department of Homeland Security 2010b). Although not directly impacting victims of the earthquake, TPS has the potential to influence recovery in Haiti. Remittance is a significant form of aid to families in Haiti with estimates of nearly \$1.5 billion sent annually to that nation (Relief Web 2010). Remittance has been found to be a significant form of aid in disaster recovery (Mohapatra et al. 2009). How applications were being completed was explored while in Florida. Two days were spent conducting participant observation at a non-profit legal aid agency in Florida which provides assistance on immigration law issues that has undertaken the task of completing TPS applications for Haitians. Follow up interviews were conducted in May of 2010 with three respondents employed by this agency.¹

Sanford International Airport

Planes began to arrive at Orlando Sanford International Airport (SFB) from Haiti shortly after the earthquake on January 12, 2010. The first plane arrived on January 14, 2010 which transported adolescents in Haiti prior to the earthquake performing missionary work. On January 16th flights began to come in regularly from Haiti, with the last official flight on February 19th, 2010. SFB received nearly 10,000 repatriates arriving from Haiti in five weeks time, a large scale effort to shelter victims of the Haiti earthquake.

The operation at SFB to receive planes carrying victims of the earthquake involved many actors. The American Red Cross “has a long-standing agreement with the federal government to

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support repatriation efforts when Americans need to be evacuated out of foreign countries because of conflict, natural disaster or other emergencies” (American Red Cross 2010) thus they were present at SFB. However, the Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS) and the Florida Department of Children and Families (DCF) were designated by the state of Florida to handle the repatriation process. Florida American Red Cross (ARC) acted as a support agency, primarily engaged in 3 functions: mass care, first aid and mental health support. SFB served as a similar site to the Emergency Repatriation Centers (ERC) established to accommodate repatriates arriving in the U.S. during the LER in 2006. An ERC was a center that “served as a place where repatriates were processed, advised of services, and provided with effective and efficient temporary services in a timely manner” which “also provided a site for short-term rest and family reunification” (Office of Refugee Resettlement 2006; 13).

The initial few days of the operation at SFB were characterized by some respondents as a learning process. The Florida Red Cross required 5 days to create a system where supplies could be obtained, stored and given to people coming off of planes arriving from Haiti. This process required a few days to establish due to the then unknown magnitude of how many people would ultimately arrive and be processed at SFB (close to 10,000). The great volume of people coming to SFB required adjustments in meeting the needs of victims. The hours of operation at SFB were extended from a facility that closes at midnight to one accepting flights 24 hours a day from Haiti. This generated a need for a system that could provide supplies continually throughout the day. One hypothesis as to why SFB was chosen as a receiving site is due to the fact this airport does not normally receive as many flights as other major airports in Florida, thus easier to set up areas to receive and provide aid to passengers from Haiti.

The process to aid victims of the Haiti earthquake required multiple organizations to interact and determine what resources they required from one another to aid those arriving at SFB. One key informant commented “there were lots of confusion” during the first few nights of this operation at SFB. Reportedly, there was a lack of clarity over who would shelter earthquake victims staying in the Orlando area. Both the Lutheran Services Florida (LSF) and DCF placed families of victims in hotels. During the LER of 2006 “(a)ccommodations at local hotels were booked and paid for by the states, in collaboration with their partners” (Office of Refugee Resettlement 2006; 13) to house repatriates. At SFB, some organizations reportedly had difficulty communicating with other organizations on what supplies were needed to carry out tasks. During the LER of 2006 a reported challenge was defining “a clear chain of command that (was) appropriate for cross-agency cooperation” (Office of Refugee Resettlement 2006; 21). At the end of the first week challenges in communication amongst agencies and organizations had subsided.

A system was in place at SFB to verify the immigration status of those arriving at SFB claiming to be U.S. citizens. In the first few days of the operation, verification for immigration status was performed on the tarmac after planes arrived. Earthquake victims then entered SFB and received items (snacks, water and clothes) from the ARC. Subsequently the structure of this operation changed to where people coming off of planes were initially greeted by ARC and provided with food, water, blankets, and given coats by other non-profits. People were finger printed (this process was performed by U.S. Customs and Border Protection) inside SFB and these were processed through many national data bases (U.S. as well as through Interpol).

DCF was the primary agency handling family reunification amongst victims of this earthquake arriving at SFB. DCF would interview victims, help them make travel arrangements

and provide loans to help these people arrive at their intended destinations. LSF provided translators to SFB to help agencies interact with victims arriving from Haiti beginning on January 18, 2010. LSF established a system internally to ensure there were 12 volunteer translators at SFB at all times, and hired 2 people to manage these volunteers. Additionally, local EMS was on site to meet medical needs of newly arriving victims. These organizations were all located in a one large room on the second floor of SFB. This was a similar model used in Florida when providing aid to victims of Hurricane Katrina. Being in the same location prevented the need for victims to travel from place to place to receive aid as well as diminish the need for emergency services to travel to provide assistance. LSF operated a shuttle system from SFB to Orlando International which repatriates utilized to get flights out of Florida to other destinations.

Assisting earthquake victims at SFB appears to have been aided by existing relationships amongst responders. ARC has performed exercises at SFB in previous years that has fostered a relationship between the two. This familiarity allowed the ARC to ask for and be granted space within the airport to house blankets, food and other items to be given to victims arriving from Haiti. The Red Cross was also permitted to park a semi-truck on the tarmac to carry out response activities. DCF and ARC have worked together in the past providing aid to the victims of Hurricane Katrina (2005). One key informant commented “it helps to know each other in peace time” across agencies and organizations when working together during emergence response. Robinson et al.’s examination of the Dallas/Fort Worth metro hospitals’ response to the great influx of evacuees resultant from Katrina requiring medical assistance found that relationships “developed prior to the 2005 Katrina hurricane were critical to respond to issues that emerged as the impact of the disaster unfolded” (2006; 324). Prior relationships amongst organizations also

helped LSF become involved in response efforts at SFB. DCF contacted LSF on Friday (January 15, 2010) to provide volunteer translators for the state as it received victims from the Haiti earthquake. It must also be noted that the ARC was notified that the first plane to land at SFB would be one carrying the youth missionaries, the same congregation from which this Mayor was a member.

One challenge which arose during this process to receive earthquake victims at SFB was the lack of sufficient intelligence on the arrival time of planes from Haiti. One key informant commented that “on a good day it was 2 hours notice” they would have of a plane’s arrival from Haiti, but then that flight would “be followed by 3 more that would come in back to back” they did not know would be landing at SFB. Another key informant claimed there was typically a one hour notice prior to the arrival of an airplane from Haiti. During the LER of 2006 the most “consistent source of frustration for many ERC staff was the unreliable flight times and unexpected flights. Such unpredictability caused great tension and staff burnout” (Office of Refugee Resettlement 2006; 21).

Another challenge was viewed to be the time it took for the U.S. federal government to offer medical assistance to Florida state agencies. One key informant claimed it was difficult to get appropriate medical personnel to assist state agencies screen the injured until the federal government enacted the National Disaster Medical System (NDMS) on February 1, 2010 (USHHS 2010c). One example was given by a key informant to illustrate the difficulty state agencies had in examining the injured prior to NDMS being activated. There was one victim transported to SFB, then to Orlando International Airport, and then to Ft. Pierce where it was then discovered this person had a compound fracture. The perceived delay in federal assistance

was considered a factor inhibiting effective medical screening of the victims especially with the great influx of people entering Florida.

An understanding of the cultural needs of people from Haiti became an emerging issue in the process to shelter victims of the earthquake. It was reported that humanitarian parolees who arrived in Florida with injured family members were not allowed by immigration to go to the hospital where relatives were being treated. Humanitarian parolees were placed in hotel rooms, yet one key informant stated many requested to share a room with another person from Haiti. According to key informants, there was a sense of isolation at the hotels for some Haitians. Thus they would often “double up” in hotel rooms of a similar cultural background. For some Haitians a sense of community only developed when they saw one another back at the hotels. Also, while in hotels the food initially provided became upsetting to several Haitians, eventually Haitian foods were supplied to humanitarian parolees. Issues over “cultural insensitivity” were also a challenge in the LER of 2006. There were issues with “providing certain meals, performing certain medical procedures (physical exam) by a male doctor to a female patient” which were encountered (Office of Refugee Resettlement 2006; 25). Wilson and Stein’s study of Katrina evacuees residing in Houston, TX one year after the storm found alienation as a “common theme among the evacuees” while “schools and housing” were “rated as better in Houston, transportation and gaining access to friends” were viewed as “much worse for evacuees” than in Louisiana (2006; 2).

Organizations providing aid to victims of the earthquake encountered a pressing need for access to victims of the earthquake. Some Haitian groups in the U.S. attempted to gain access to victims of the earthquake who arrived in Florida. One key informant stated that members of some Haitian organizations used their cultural identity to make claims they should have contact

with victims of the earthquake, stating “we are Haitian, these are our people, we want access...”. This occurred at some area hospitals. However, hospital protocols prevented access to Haitian victims receiving treatment in Florida. There were also issues with media attempting to gain access to victims of the earthquake. In one instance, a reporter arrived at one hospital claiming they were on site to do a story on Haitian orphans, yet was escorted off hospital premises. The desire of the press to have access to those being accommodated and assisted was also a challenge state agencies encountered during the LER in 2006 (Office of Refugee Resettlement 2006)

Another issue discussed was the lack of reliance on pre-existing established or written plans on how to respond to repatriates arriving in Florida. One key informant stated there were plans at the federal level to guide this repatriation process yet were not followed. It was expressed that not using a written plan defeats the purpose of having them. This key informant felt a lack of reliance on established plans impacted state operations to accommodate earthquake victims arriving from Haiti. Studies of host communities of Hurricane Katrina evacuees (Gavagan et al. 2006; Robinson et al. 2006) have reported emerging and/or new efforts developed to meet the demands of accepting and accommodating large numbers of the displaced. Perhaps efforts to meet the demands of a large number of people at SFB led to new and/or improvised processes that fell outside the scope of pre-established plans. Although efforts at SFB may not have followed the guidelines pre-established in formal guidelines, these responding organization were able to adequately meet the demands of this event.

Temporary Protected Status and the Earthquake

Granting the ability to apply for Temporary Protected Status (TPS) to Haitian nationals residing in the U.S. is a unique outcome resultant from this earthquake. There have been

mobilized efforts in the past for TPS to be given Haitians in the U.S. when natural disasters have greatly impacted their home country. Most notable (and recent) were the four consecutive tropical storms (Fay, Gustav, Hanna and Ike) that hit Haiti between August and September 2008 which cumulatively left nearly 800 dead and 300 missing, destroyed one third of the country's rice crop used for domestic consumption which worsened the already existent food shortage; damaged close to 85,000 homes and destroying over 22,000 and displaced 150,000 people which left a total affected population of total affected population of 826,685 (Congressional Research Service 2008) . Many actors such as U.S. senators and social organizations had asked for Haitians in the U.S. to receive TPS (HaitianCongressPAC 2008; MargueriteLaurent 2008; TPSNOW.org 2009), yet ultimately the Haitian community was not granted TPS status under the Bush administration (jcmstrategie 2009). There was a continued push for TPS to be granted to Haitians to the Obama administration prior to the earthquake (Boston Haitian 2009; ImmigrationRightsYesWeCan 2009; NAACP 2009; Washington Post 2009) and after (Change.org 2010; CNN.com 2010; Gilligrand.Senate.gov 2010; Imagine2050 2010). TPS was officially granted to Haitian nationals on January 15, 2010 (Department of Homeland Security 2010). This is the first time that TPS has ever been granted to the Haiti, an example of disaster diplomacy (Kelman 2006).

Time spent at a non-profit legal aid agency who provide legal assistance on matters of immigration was studied utilizing participant observation as well as follow up interviews to explore how TPS applications have been completed by Haitians residing in an area of Florida. This agency became involved early on in efforts to inform the Haitian community on how to complete TPS applications. This agency has extensive ties and a history of providing service to the Haitian community and knew it would be engaged in helping in the aftermath of the

earthquake, in some capacity. With TPS being granted on January 15, 2010, actions to assist the Haitian community began merely days afterwards. This agency participated in an information session on Martin Luther King Day (January 18, 2010) at a prominent Haitian Church where hundreds turned out to learn more about the TPS application process. There was a great need to act quickly due to the “notarios” or “people who aren’t attorneys yet practice immigration law” as respondent explained. These “notarios” in the Haitian community are described as people who take money from those desiring immigration aid, fill out paperwork on an applicant’s behalf yet never file any paperwork for immigration assistance.

The process to complete TPS applications may be a demanding process for organizations and agencies that are already overburden with normal everyday work related activities. Conducting participant observation in February 2010, a continued flow of Haitians came into this agency for assistance. The reception area was filled to standing room capacity with many people spilling out into the hallway. The legal staff worked 13 hour days during the week and weekends to meet the demands generated by TPS applications. A second office was opened a few floors above to handle the needs of applicants. They received many volunteers such as lawyers and law school students to assist with TPS applications, even hiring some on a full time basis.

The process to complete TPS applications for the Haitian community was aided by prior networks. Due to this agency’s early efforts to aid the Haitian community to inform and help complete TPS applications, and early media coverage they were besieged by many requiring help. When overwhelmed, they relied on an existent listserv consisting of agencies and organizations who provide legal aid on immigration issues which they could refer applicants to for help with TPS applications. This listserv and the connections between these agencies

permitted these organizations to not overlap efforts to help the Haitian community complete TPS applications.

There is some hesitation in the Haitian community about completing TPS applications. Key informants discussed a sense of mistrust (although minimal) amongst in the Haitian community about providing identifiable information; some are unsure of how this information will be used in the future. Some of this skepticism has subsided in the Haitian community since people actually see TPS applicants attaining a work permit. One young Haitian male receiving help with his TPS application stated his wife and three children experienced the earthquake while he was in Florida. He stated he intends to use the work privileges TPS affords to send money to his family, who are now displaced in another nation.

Conclusions

There are many lessons learned by this exploratory research regarding the process to accommodate and shelter victims of a catastrophe outside a host's community. Most notable is that the process to help victims of the earthquake relied on existent bonds amongst actors. As Robinson et al. 2006 concluded in their study of Dallas/Forth Worth area's response to those displaced by Katrina, they stated "the shadow of the past loomed large in the development of the collaborative responses to the needs of people arriving from the Gulf Coast" (2006; 326). There was also a need to be mindful of the cultural needs of victims, specifically dietary and social connectivity to people of a similar cultural background. A need to have and use established plans to repatriate or accommodate victims outside of a host's community should be explored in conjunction with an examination of new or emerging methods developed to meet the needs generated by this event. When assisting an unexpectedly large number of people (close to

10,000) arriving from another community, it will take some time initially to establish protocol on how to meet the needs of the population being served.

A continuing question with this repatriation process will be how victims of the earthquake are integrated into host communities in the U.S. and what resources are applied to make this transition. In the wake of Hurricane Katrina, several communities in the U.S. (FEMA 2005; FEMA 2006; Ghost et al. 2007) those displaced by this natural hazard as well as federal aid to accommodate these victims of the storm. It is only now that we are beginning to see empirical analysis on how those displaced by Katrina have transitioned into their host community (Groen and Polivka 2008; Wilson and Stein 2006), with racialized perceptions having an impact on opinions over continued assistance for evacuees displaced by the storm (Hunt et al. 2009). Additionally, those Haitians applying for and receiving TPS also warrant study. If TPS is granted, will remittance help victims still in Haiti more so than the multitude of aid agencies congregated in that country currently? Will the U.S. continue to offer extensions on TPS as it has done with those from El Salvador, Honduras and Nicaragua? What socio-political factors may impede or advance an extension of federally approved stay for these Haitians in the U.S.? TPS given Haitians is an example of disaster diplomacy (Kelman 2006), one that has been lobbied for many years. Time will tell how host communities and larger socio-political forces and shape the continued existence of this program amongst the Haitian community in the U.S.

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