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NH high-tech, prosthetics companies help Haitians

By Kathy McCormack, Associated Press Writer | February 10, 2010



The information gathered by Global Relief team members will help secure prosthetic limbs for earthquake victims.

CONCORD, N.H. --Assigned to gather information on earthquake victims in Haiti, Adam Cote came across a little girl who had lost her leg. She kept calling him Daddy.

An interpreter told him her story: She was one of three daughters. When the quake hit last month, the family's house had collapsed, killing her mother and two sisters. One of the girls had landed on the toddler.

"That leg had to get amputated because that girl was crushed on top of it," Cote said. "To hear that and to see this 2-year-old girl with one leg ... it's terrible."

Cote, 36, recently returned from eight days in Haiti, part of a team from a Portsmouth technology company asked to take a census of people who lost hands, arms, feet and legs because they were trapped in the rubble of collapsed buildings.

The team from Global Relief Technologies, using satellite-linked handheld computers, has been volunteering to put together information on amputees for a group called Healing Hands for Haiti, which lost its prosthetics shop in the quake and is working to rebuild it.

The company is working with Handicap International on a contract to build a database of amputee victims; other relief groups would be able to use the database to care for patients. Lea Radick, a spokeswoman for Handicap International, said the organization is not aware of similar record-keeping efforts being done on amputees in Haiti.

Handicap International estimates there are at least 2,000 quake amputees.

The trip by Global Relief Technologies was emotional for Cote, of Portland, Maine, a former Army officer who has served in Bosnia and Iraq and has four children, the oldest 5 years old, but he plans to head back soon.

The team has been sending photos of the injured with other personal information daily to New Hampshire-based New England Brace Co., which is volunteering its services as it prepares to make artificial limbs and collaborate with other prosthetics companies to come up with treatment plans for the patients; it plans to hold fundraising events to help send teams of workers to Haiti in the coming months.

"In the old days we would grab an armload of equipment and supplies and head in," said Dennis Acton, of New England Brace. "Now we can plan ahead and know exactly what patients need, so it will speed up delivery of the treatments tremendously."

Kendra Calhoun, president of the Amputee Coalition of America, a Knoxville, Tenn.-based national advocacy and support group, said it is working with suppliers such as Hanger Prosthetics and Orthotics Inc., which has more than 600 clinics nationwide, to collect used prostheses, crutches and wheelchairs to ship to Healing Hands for Haiti for distribution.

"I am hopeful that folks who have sprained their ankle in the United States and have that crutch laying in their garage, they get that out to one of Hanger's clinics and they can get that packaged up and sent down," she said Tuesday.

Calhoun said other prosthetics companies, such as Ossur and Otto Bock, which are based overseas and have offices in the United States, have mobile units that they are planning to set up in Haiti to help put together and fit artificial limbs.

Acton, who also just returned from Haiti, said the amputees need one to three months to allow for healing before they can be fitted with prosthetic limbs. He estimated that his business would be able to start fitting some patients by the end of February.

Acton said workers from New England Brace would travel to Haiti to build most of the prosthetics. The work for some advanced cases would be done in New Hampshire.

The Global Relief Technologies group has evaluated at least 150 amputees so far, but it knows there are many more out there, some of whom have already returned to their families and may be difficult to find. The group discovered that just about everyone it interviewed in the hospitals and clinics has a cell phone or knows someone with one, so those people will be easier to track.

One of the hardest parts was seeing children who lost their limbs.

"When I first see them, it is difficult to imagine what their quality of life will be in Haiti, with the double amputees in particular," said team member Gaelle Simon, speaking from Haiti, one of the poorest

countries in the world.

She grew up there and lost some relatives in the quake.

"Once you start talking to the kids and you see that their spirit remains intact, and they're happy and full of joy, it does lift your spirits," she said.

She said that the bright yellow handheld computers have captured the children's attention and that they enjoy seeing their photos pop up instantly.

Using the satellite technology to assess patients, hospital bed and surgery capacities and building damage can be done easily -- the team has done analyses of roads and buildings while driving around Port-au-Prince, Leogane and Jacmel. The results can be seen immediately by anyone on a computer who has access to a Web site set up by the company.

The company was founded in 2003 by Michael Gray, a former U.S. Department of State official who served as a refugee officer in Macedonia and Albania. It has assisted agencies like the American Red Cross following natural disasters including Hurricanes Ike, Gustav and Katrina.

In 2006, the Department of Defense awarded the company a contract to provide the handheld computers to Marine Corps field crews in Southeast Asia who were collecting information on bird flu. Last year, it worked with Maine's forest rangers on collecting foliage information.

"They used to do it with a piece of paper and a clipboard and people walking house to house with a pen writing it down and then going back to the hotel and typing it in on an Excel spreadsheet," Cote said.

Now it's fill out a form, click a picture, lock in a GPS coordinate, click and send.

On the Net:

Healing Hands for Haiti: <http://www.healinghandsforhaiti.org>

Global Relief Technologies: <http://www.globalrelieftech.com>

New England Brace Co.: <http://www.nebrace.com> ■