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Emergency Preparedness Pointers

The Dilemma of Donations

In response to the tragic earthquakes in Haiti, the United States and its citizens have reached out to help those in need. People have wanted to contribute whatever they could to aid those who have suffered greatly from these events. However, the desire to help must be balanced with the wisdom of effective donations. During recent catastrophic events, mountains of unusable donated goods created additional burdens on those who were trying to respond to the disaster.

Great Intentions, Bad Results

The aftermath of the 2004 tsunami in Indonesia provides a good look at post disaster donation issues. At a time when the area was devastated and the people were hungry, care packages began to pile up. They were filled with teddy bears, pajamas, winter clothing, birth control pills, half used bottles of prescription drugs and ointments. Corporations sent tons of soon-to-be expired pharmaceuticals. The piles of unsolicited goods were too great to completely sort through. Buried beneath care packages containing out of date antibiotics were the world's most advanced malaria drugs. These were left untouched while people along the coast that had lost their homes and family members suffered from malarial fever from lack of treatment. Available refrigerated storage space was minimal so many of these drugs became unusable. Consequently, most of the drugs had to be incinerated. The process cost donors and the Indonesian government millions.



Why Cash is King

According to noted international aid worker and blogger, Sandra Schimmelpfennig, "Sending donated goods overseas is an appealing idea because it makes you feel like you're really helping while at the same time recycling things that are no longer of any use to you. Unfortunately inappropriate donations can do more harm than good and it often costs more to ship used goods than to buy new goods locally. Donated goods can also clog ports, preventing more immediate relief items from getting through."

Florian Westphal of the International Committee of the Red Cross concurs with Sandra. He believes that buying the goods locally not only saves on shipping costs but also puts money into a local economy that needs the business badly. Westphal further states, "What you really want to be doing as much as possible is actually address the real needs of people on the ground. That's got to be the priority, and obviously cash gives you much more flexibility in terms of making sure that relief items you provide really correspond to what people need and what people are used to."

Haiti's economy was suffering prior to the earthquake. Over two-thirds of the workforce did not have a formal job and 80% of the population lived below the poverty line. The earthquake did not heavily damage parts of Haiti and there was virtually no damage to the neighboring Dominican Republic. Purchasing locally produced products from these locations will cost far less than transporting used donated goods. It will also create jobs, provide only the needed goods and maximize the dollars spent on the relief effort.

For More Information On How To Help In Haiti Go To:

http://www.whitehouse.gov/haitiearthquake_embed or <http://www.interaction.org/crisis-list/earthquake-haiti>



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