

Skeptics Question Legitimacy of Haiti Relief Organizations

By **KERI ANN FLACCOMIO**
Staff Writer

Multiple relief campaigns that have raised millions of dollars for Haiti relief have some questioning whether their donations are being put to the best use.

The Ramapo College community has taken an active role in responding to the crisis in the first two weeks of the spring semester. Student and faculty relief committees are planning events to raise donations over the next few months.

But while most students and staff members are willing to show support, many want more assurance before releasing money in these difficult economic times.

"I am hesitant to donate money to the relief efforts because of the lack of governmental and organizational structure in Haiti right now," said Colleen Freund, graduate assistant of the Center for Academic Advising and First-Year Experience. "I don't know if they have enough structure or strong leaders to use the money in the best possible way."

Sophomore P.J. Pimpinelli turned to media endorsements for guidance in choosing an organization, but expressed concern after donating to "Hope for Haiti Now," a global relief effort that supports "Unicef," "Yéle Haiti," "Stand with Haiti" and other organizations.

"I am very skeptical about donating to anyone in fear of it being a scam," Pimpinelli said. "You really need to do some research about an organization before sending money to them."

Hoping to eliminate uncertainty, Ray Shepherd, chief executive officer for the American Red Cross of northern New Jersey, explained that 100 percent of all Haiti-relief



photo courtesy of the Red Cross, via Flickr

A Red Cross worker lends aid to a young boy in Haiti.

donations is used directly. The money goes toward food, shelter, water, clothing, fuel, medical supplies and personnel, which are brought in based on the current needs in Haiti.

"The reason we ask for money rather than items," Shepherd said in a recent interview, "is because they have immediate needs down there and it's easier for the American Red Cross to purchase things when they need."

"After any event like this," added Shepherd, "relief organizations are required by law to show an account of how donated money is spent, so donors have the privilege of asking for that any time."

An average of 92 cents of every dollar the Red Cross spends is invested in humanitarian services and programs.

Sophomore Dan Loughrey feels confident

in his contribution to the Red Cross, but discourages making donations through third-party sources. "Convenience stores offering to donate ten dollars out of your purchase to Haiti reek of corruption, and you have to wonder exactly how much of your money is actually going to the cause," he said.

Donors can make tax-deductible contributions to the Red Cross Haiti Relief and Development by mailing a check, using online services, calling 800-733-2767 or texting "Haiti" to 90999 on their cell phones to make a \$10 donation. Mailing address and online-donation information is available at the Red Cross website. So far, the organization has spent more than \$67 million on urgent aid in Haiti.

In addition, the U.S. Department of State suggests donors look into organizations

such as the "Clinton Bush Haiti Fund," "InterAction" and "Mercy Corps." A list of legitimate charitable organizations active nationwide is also available on the Ramapo Haiti relief website: <http://www.ramapo.edu/haitirelief/index.html>

Warner Wada, visual arts professor and member of Ramapo's Faculty/Staff Haiti Relief Committee, encourages people to make donations through upcoming events on campus. These events include a Berrie Center gallery exhibition of the work of early Haitian painter Hyppolite; a benefit concert of Haitian and devotional songs put on by the Ramapo Chorale groups; and a screening of "The Agronomist," directed by Oscar Award-winning filmmaker Jonathan Demme.

Students of visual arts professor Shalom Gorewitz will be designing and selling T-shirts with Haitian images at the gallery exhibition and throughout the relief campaign.

"We feel it is important that our efforts are long term," said Wada, "with events planned throughout the semester and several long-term projects projected to continue for at least two years."

All funds raised will go to New Jersey-approved charities, such as "Doctors without Borders."

Although the donation process involves research and careful consideration, relief-effort committee and organization members urge people make contributions that can save lives.

"I'd say, if [people are] uncomfortable or uncertain—with regard to our organization or whichever organization they want to give to—" Shepherd said, "contact us and let us tell you how your donations will be used."

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