



DCF greets Haiti earthquake survivors with smiles, hugs, help

Survivors helped by DCF aid others



Two earthquake survivors pose with three volunteers (In blue shirts: DCF Program Operations Administrator Sonia De Escobar, Benefit Recovery Staff Assistant Tangela Miles and Woodler Bazelais)

The elderly woman arrived wearing a pretty blue hat. After she completed the immigration processing, she walked to the waiting area. Department employees were assisting an unaccompanied minor who was going to be picked up by his father. They began to talk to the elderly woman in the pretty blue hat. They found out that she was staying in Miami but had no one to pick her up.

All of a sudden, the young boy who was being helped by the Department announced, "No worry. Now she has a ride."

As soon as his father arrived, he agreed to give the woman a ride.

More than two weeks after an earthquake left Haiti in ruins, Department employees are assisting those who have suffered tremendously. At around-the-clock operations at airports in Miami, Sanford, Homestead and Fort Lauderdale, and on-call in West Palm Beach and Port St. Lucie, the Department has welcomed more than 15,000 survivors.

The tireless efforts of our employees, many working through the week-ends and into the wee hours of the morning, cannot be applauded enough. Your service and commitment to our daily mission of helping the state's most vulnerable are a credit to our Department and the state.

More than 6,000 of those arriving from Haiti have received direct assistance from the Department. With financial aid that will be reimbursed by the federal government, the Department has provided essential immediate help, including food and water.

We also have provided short-term loans to individuals for travel to a final destination with family or friends, and lodging for those who need an overnight stay.

Beyond the numbers, there are hundreds of touching tales that highlight

the value of our work. We are sharing some of them here.

Department employees have offered their own clothing to those in need. We also have provided teddy bears, toys and a warm smile for children who have suffered in ways most of us cannot imagine.

Stark reminders of the tragedy's toll come with the relief we provide. In Miami, I met a 28-year-old man, carrying a 2-month-old infant, who had lost his wife and three children in the earthquake.

The trauma we are seeing on our TVs and in person as earthquake survivors arrive from Haiti is difficult. But we can all be proud to have been there to help, and we will continue to help in any way we can for as long as it takes.

Our employees around the state have always shown a commitment to protecting the state's most vulnerable. Thank you, again, on behalf of all Floridians, for the work you are doing not only during this tragedy, but every day.



Department of Children and Families Secretary George Sheldon



Photo by Joe Burbank/Orlando Sentinel

DCF Child Protective Investigator Valery Dambreville interprets for Gov. Charlie Crist.

DCF volunteer finds lost aunt who fled Haiti

Child Protective Investigator Valery Dambreville was the first to volunteer in his area for the Department's efforts. He had not spoken to family members in Haiti and feared for their safety.

Volunteering as a

translator, he worked around the clock during initial flights into Orlando-Sanford. To his surprise, his aunt, whom he had not heard from, stepped off an evacuation flight and into his arms.

Val's story inspired oth-

ers and encouraged hope. He was interviewed by the *Orlando Sentinel* and *People* magazine. When Governor Charlie Crist and Secretary Sheldon hosted a news conference on-site, Val was a guest speaker.

DCF investigator, teddy bears comfort 6-year-old

A complete list of services offered by the Department for those affected by the earthquake is available at:
www.dcf.state.fl.us/Haiti.shtml

For information on the U.S. Government's relief efforts, please visit:
www.whitehouse.gov/haitiearthquake_embed

To find and share information about missing persons in Haiti, use the "Person Finder" tool:
www.state.gov/haitiquake

Child Protective Investigator Lisa Sarkees arrived for the morning shift at Orlando-Sanford International Airport to relieve her supervisor, Kristen Smoyer. Kristen had been working with Oliver, a 6-year-old who had arrived with a woman on an airplane from Haiti. The woman had coached Oliver to say that she was his aunt, but Kristen learned the woman was not Oliver's aunt. Using Oliver's passport, Kristen was able to locate Oliver's true aunt in New York.

Lisa called Oliver's aunt, but she was unable to come to Florida immediately to pick him up. She wondered if a friend in West Palm Beach could care for Oliver until she arrived about a week later.

Instead, Lisa accompanied Oliver on a flight to New York's JFK Airport to meet his aunt.

With two hours before the 10:30 a.m. flight, another investigator, Missy Creeger, drove Lisa and Oliver to Orlando International Airport. Oliver spoke a limited amount of English, but he and Lisa were able to communicate. After passing the security checkpoints, Lisa bought Oliver some breakfast – his choice: a Sprite, a hashbrown, and a sausage, egg and cheese McMuffin.

They boarded the plane and were on their way. But when the flight hit some turbulence and the plane

began to shake, tears began flowing from Oliver's eyes. Lisa assumed the shaking frightened Oliver, and he nodded his head yes when she asked him. She then held him until the plane landed, trying to comfort him, reassuring him that he would soon be safe with his aunt.



When they arrived at the airport, Lisa let Oliver listen to a few songs on her iPod while they were waiting for his aunt to arrive. Oliver clutched two teddy bears that had been given to him when he arrived from Haiti. When he saw his aunt, he ran to her. The aunt began to cry, and so did Lisa. "It was wonderful to see them reunite," she said.

Alone with passport and phone number, 12-year-old survivor joins grateful father

The father had been waiting at Miami International Airport for several hours, anticipating his 12-year-old son's return. When the child arrived, Chief Southern Regional Legal Counsel Javier A. Ley-Soto escorted him to

the terminal.

When Javier asked the boy if he had any luggage, he pulled his hands out of his pockets and showed his passport in one hand and an Oreo cookie packet and piece of paper with his father's number on it. "He

told me that was all he had," Javier said.

But the boy's face lit up with a big smile when Javier spotted the father walking down the hall. The little boy ran up behind his father and surprised him.

After a very joyous em-

brace, however, the reunion turned bittersweet as the son told his father that his mother had died when their house collapsed.

The father thanked Javier and the Department for bringing him his son.

Haitian couple celebrate 45th anniversary with DCF volunteers

After going through the immigration process, a couple sat down in the waiting area at Homestead Air Force Base, and Department employees began

talking to them. The man said he was happy to be alive and that it was his birthday. When asked how old he was, he said, "Today, I am 72 years old."

He then grinned and added that he and his wife had been married to each other for 45 years! The staff did not have a cake, but they did



have Oreo cookies. They sang *Happy Birthday*, and all of the volunteers gathered around to wish the couple "*Joyeaux Anniversaire!*"



Three sisters prepare for a new beginning



Child Protective Investigator Supervisor Jenny Soriano-Priestly (right) helped a woman find her three nieces.

When a social worker at a Veterans Administration Hospital in New York found out about the devastating earthquake in Haiti, all she

wanted to do was get to Haiti and “find my girls” – her nieces... three beautiful sisters whose mother’s whereabouts were unknown.

The social worker’s brother – the girls’ father – had died several years ago. Although she knew that becoming a mother of three growing girls would not be easy, their aunt began trying to adopt them in 2004. They were in the final steps of completing that adoption when the earthquake hit. She frantic-

ally made last-minute preparations and returned to chaos in Haiti.

Their aunt knew where the house used to be and thought she could still find it when she arrived in Haiti. As she made her way through the wrecked city, she wondered what had become of her girls. Like many others, she was not prepared for the level of devastation she saw.

She finally found the three girls simply sitting in front of what used to be their home. Everyone there, she told DCF volun-

teers, was doing the same thing - their houses had fallen, they had nowhere to go, and they simply sat waiting for help. The aunt stayed on the street with the girls for two days until they finally made it to the U.S. Embassy with the necessary papers in hand.

When they arrived at Homestead Air Reserve Base, they were grateful to be alive. As the girls enjoyed their boxed lunch and cold soda, they began to share their story...and the plans for their new beginning.

Newborns bring hope amid despair

The plane landed with little notice and urgent medical needs.

Twenty-one injured earthquake survivors were taken to hospitals in Broward County and throughout South Florida. Another 18 survivors, including a pregnant woman, were escorted to awaiting Department of Children and Families employees at Fort Lauderdale International Airport.

Teamwork and compassion combined to help the

survivors, including a 2-year-old.

Community agencies stepped in to find emergency shelter, even keeping the women together so they could support each other.

“The look in their eyes was just haunting when they got there,” said Circuit 17 Operations Administrator Kim Gorsuch. “But when they left, they all gave us big hugs, so we made some headway.”

The pregnant woman

was taken by ambulance to a local hospital, where she gave birth the next morning. The mother and baby are doing well.

Two days later, another pregnant earthquake survivor who came into the United States from Haiti via the Dominican Republic was staying in a hotel with her toddler son when she went into labor. She delivered a baby boy.

Plantation General Hospital was kind enough to put them all in a large pri-

vate room so the toddler could remain with his mother.

The Department helped the woman apply for services for her newborn and arranged for car seats to be delivered to the hospital for the baby and the toddler to travel to Tampa, where they will live with the woman’s sister.



DCF team helps reunite 16-year-old with mother

Sixteen-year-old “Giana” moved to Haiti from New Jersey three months ago. She was living with her aunt and her adult brother when the earthquake struck, killing her aunt.

Giana had attempted to save her aunt’s life and was grieving the loss. She also had to leave behind her brother, who is not a United States citizen.

She returned to the United States. Because Giana has an estranged relationship with her father and stepmother, the Department worked hard to find her mother.

Mental health counselors on-site at Orlando-Sanford International Airport assisted Giana, who was at times inconsolable. With law enforcement, the Department found the child’s mother and reunited them.

Team effort by 3 DCF Regions unites family of 6



ACCESS specialist Claire Howzell explains the application process to quake survivor Gina Theodore (center) and her cousin, Myrlene Legroue (right).

Gina Latour Theodore could not help but weep as she sat in the Department's administrative offices in West Palm Beach. She was asleep inside her home in Port-au-Prince when the earthquake hit. Her five children – ages

7,8,11,16 and 18 – had just returned home from school and were able to escape. But Gina could not open the door to the house. "The house cracked," said her cousin, Myrlene Legroue of Wellington, Fla., "but it did not fall."

Gina's children watched as most of the homes surrounding theirs fell. They slept outside, then traveled for hours on a bus, past miles of destruction. "They're traumatized," Myrlene said. "There were bodies everywhere. They have many friends that died."

Gina's husband and sev-

eral relatives stayed in Haiti, but three of their children are American. Gina and three children arrived at Orlando-Sanford International Airport. Her eldest daughter and another of her children flew into Homestead. When Gina and the children arrived in Orlando, Department employees there helped them with bus transportation to Palm Beach County, where Myrlene works in the emergency room of a local hospital. When the rest of the family arrived in Homestead, Department employees there helped them get to a friend's house. In Palm Beach County,

Department employees helped Gina apply for assistance for her American-born children.

Inside the DCF building, Gina feared there would be trembling aftershocks. But she managed to smile with gratitude for those who have helped her and her family.



Earthquake survivor Gina Theodore (left) reflects on the devastation in her homeland as her cousin helps her complete an application for benefits.

Helping others eases DCF employee's personal worry

Like many other Department of Children and Families employees on Jan. 12, 2010, Jean Lacroix came to work with a heavy heart. He shared his disbelief. He shared his worry. But he dared not share his fear...He simply could not consider the unthinkable about his mother. He had many friends and relatives in Haiti, but his primary concern was for his mother.

Days went by, filled with the frenzy of hearing bits and pieces in the news, vigilantly waiting by the phone, sleepless nights,

wishful thinking of hearing something, anything at all, about his mom. The weight of not knowing was starting to take its toll. At work, fellow Child Protective Investigators noticed that Jean had become more quiet, and although they were giving him their support and he continued to come to work, it was obvious that he was becoming even more frightened.

Then the e-mails started to flow – a call for volunteers, especially those employees who speak Creole. The flights were starting to come in, and the Depart-

ment was seeking volunteers to greet people, to help feed them, to transport, to console...to help! Jean was one of the first Creole-speaking Family Safety Child Protective Investigators in the Southern Region to answer the call. "If I am going to worry," he figured, "I might as well worry while helping others..."

Jean, a native of Haiti who has worked at the Department for the past nine years, finally received the much-awaited call. His mother had been found, and she was safe!

All of his colleagues celebrated the news and surrounded him with hugs of support. Although he still has not heard directly from his mom and is still worried, he has the bright light of hope!

Jean continues to work at the Homestead Air Reserve Base, greeting the young and the old in Creole, helping them understand what is going on and showing support. He continues to do so while waiting to hear his mother's voice, hoping to soon hold her in his arms.



DCF volunteers comfort survivors, go extra mile

Child protection employees were called to assist a father and son who survived the earthquake in Haiti. The toddler's mother died in the quake, and his father was transported with severe trauma, including a broken back and hip fractures. He was taken to a local hospital while Department volunteers cared for his 3-year-old son.

Department staff were able to find relatives in Miami and connect the young boy with family – allowing his dad to focus on his recovery.

A 17-year-old girl and her 3-month-old sibling arrived in Sanford without their parents. The teen said that their mother and father had not returned from the market the day of the quake. She feared they had been killed. The two siblings boarded a plane together. The Department was able to provide interim care for both and find relatives in

New York where they safely traveled on to family.

With much emphasis on children, Sanford operations quickly identified another very special population – senior citizens. These seniors were ages 90 and up. They were frail and wheelchair-stricken. Some suffered from dementia. Others had not had critical medications in days. Many provided contact information to loved ones, but often those contacts were either unsuccessful or incorrect.

DCF volunteer Ila Napier worked tirelessly, using any tool to track down potential family of those without identified loved ones. Ila treated the passengers with respect and dignity.

When two unaccompanied teens arrived from Haiti, they were able to provide child protection employees with information about loved ones in Lake

Worth, several hours away. Without hesitation, Child Protective Investigator Martin Pertosa drove the teens down south to unite the family as quickly as possible.

When an 11-year-old boy arrived in the country unaccompanied, he was granted a six-month temporary stay through customs. To enable the boy to stay with a particular adult, child protective workers expedited a home study, which prevented the child from entering foster care.

When an adult passenger missed her bus to Miami, the mistake was overwhelming for an already exhausted evacuee. Mental health counselors feared that waiting longer for the next bus would only exacerbate the situation. Roxanne Coon, who works in Human Resources, drove the stranded woman

to loved ones waiting in Miami, rather than making her wait again for the next bus.

An elderly man arrived weak in a wheelchair and waited quietly. He had severe cataracts that greatly impaired his vision. His daughter, who was traveling with two, young twin boys, was overwhelmed caring for the family and their arrangements.

Not having eaten well in days and tired of the snacks and candy provided by the Red Cross, he asked Central Region Communications Director Carrie Hoepfner for a sandwich. With no sandwich in sight, Carrie tracked down a can of tuna and a fork. Worried that he would decline the tuna, she made a deal: She'd sit with him and peel him an orange if he would eat the tuna. He agreed, and the two shared dinner on the floor of Gate 6.

DCF investigator helps tearful teen find family, reach new home

Thirteen-year-old "Mia," a United States citizen, was living in Haiti with her mother, father and 15-year-old brother when the earthquake destroyed their home. Her parents sent her to the United States to live in New York with her uncle. When Child Protective Investigations Supervisor Jenifer Hofferberth met

her, she was all alone in the airport. She had her school yearbook and began quietly flipping through the pages. As time passed, she began to point to the pictures in the yearbook and tell Jenifer who was alive, missing or deceased. As tears trickled down her cheeks, she said that when the earthquake hit, she

was in a friend's house and the home began to shake violently. As it shook harder and harder, they tried to escape, clinging to each other and to anything that was affixed to the walls. Eventually, they all made it out of the home safely.

Mia has no idea where her family is in Haiti now. She has no means to lo-

cate them. She was taken to the U.S. Embassy, then directly to the airport. Her brother will be going to the Dominican Republic, and her parents will do the best they can to survive.

Mia's uncle was contacted in New York, and she was safely delivered to the only family she has in the United States.