

Recycling group gets to work to help Haiti

Industrial surplus to go to country

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When news coverage out of Haiti slips off the front pages, the real work is just beginning for employees of the Institution Recycling Network.

The Concord-based organization, created in 1999, works with hundreds of colleges and universities, hospitals, high schools, and private businesses across the country to collect and redistribute supplies otherwise destined for landfills.

Its surplus property reuse program coordinates with dozens of charitable agencies worldwide to determine what supplies are needed where, and then ships everything from medical equipment to building materials to countries in need.

The earthquake that hit Port-au-Prince nearly two weeks ago put IRN employees in high gear. From a small office on South State Street, workers last week fielded calls from potential recipients and organized supply drives with clients.

After life-saving materials, supplies for stabilization - medical equipment, clothing, linens, stoves, cooking supplies and mattresses - will be needed next. Those shipments probably won't be ready to send out for a few weeks, but preparation is key, said Mark Berry, IRN's surplus program manager.

Following stabilization supplies, items for reconstruction, such as building materials, furniture, beds, and medical and school furnishings, are next on the list. Reconstruction materials will be required for years to come but aren't immediately needed, said Dana Draper, IRN's chief operating officer. The company is in the process of acquiring additional warehouse space and storage trailers to collect the items, which are expected to start shipping out by March, he said.

"Most people want to do the right thing but may not realize the logistics involved with disaster relief," Draper said. "You have to be on the ball. You're dealing with agencies, figuring out what's needed and trying to coordinate that with what you can get. It's a lot of work."

Here's how the program works: When a U.S. entity, such as a hospital, school or business, has a surplus of goods or no longer has a need for used materials, it gets in touch with IRN.

If the company knows there is or will be a need for those items, it will arrange a pickup. Most materials from the East Coast are processed through the company's warehouse in Everett, Mass., where they're sorted and later shipped by boat to the receiving country.

West Coast goods typically go straight from truck to port. Aid organizations in the receiving country arrange to pick up the shipment and get it where it needs to go.

Costs to remove and transport the items are mostly covered by the group getting rid of them, and the aid organizations pay a portion of the transportation expenses, Draper said.

It costs less to recycle the items than dispose of them, Draper said, and needy communities benefit from the otherwise unattainable goods.



University of New Hampshire students load surplus dorm furniture into an overseas shipping container bound for Haiti at the Durham campus.

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The IRN, with a staff of about 15, also tracks the materials and makes sure they go where they're supposed to.

That's important to many of the company's clients, Draper said.

"A lot of the generators we deal with want convenience," Draper said. "They also want to know where the items are going and that they get to the right destination."

The company is familiar with the relief protocol following natural disasters and delivered supplies to New Orleans after Hurricane Katrina and Indonesia following the tsunami, Draper said.

Disaster relief is only part of the program.

In developing countries - and in parts of the U.S. - there's an endless need for supplies, and the company frequently ships goods to Third world countries with less pressing needs, Berry said.

Having previously worked with aid groups in Haiti, the company has connections on the ground; it shipped nearly 6,400 tons of relief supplies to the country over the past five years, Berry said.

As the requests flood in from Haiti, the company is taking a measured approach and reaching out to clients with a very specific needs list, he said.

"Who we talk to now will impact what we can act on. We're making calls and asking, 'Can you help us get these specific items together?' " he said. "Right now we're taking a lot of inquiries, pedaling like a mouse on a wheel."