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IRSC training Haitians in disaster preparedness

By James Kendall Special to Treasure Coast Newspapers

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FORT PIERCE — A group of Haitian first responders hope to be a little better prepared the next time an emergency hits their country, thanks to a program at Indian River State College's Treasure Coast Public Safety Training Complex.

Eight government employees who lived through last year's massive earthquake finished their training this week and are headed home to share what they have learned in the intense, two-week program.

Back in Haiti they will serve as trainers, and a new group of Haitians will soon arrive at IRSC.

The groups are part of a year-long training plan that will bring at least three more groups of trainees to the campus complex. The goal is to have the students who learn at IRSC train 1,000 people in Haiti.

The groups are being trained in search and rescue, disaster medical operations, fire safety and suppression, taking command of disaster scenes and emergency planning/preparation.

The plan also includes sending IRSC instructors to Haiti in late March to oversee the training programs being established there.

The two-week training costs \$16,500 and is being paid for by the Haitian government, said Stephen Huntsberger, IRSC's dean of public service education.

"This has been a win-win situation for all sides. Not only do the trainees gain valuable skills, but they have been staying in local hotels and dining at local restaurants, which is an economic benefit for the community," he said.

The training program grew out of the college's Citizens Emergency Response Training, which works to prepare Martin and St. Lucie county residents to help with disaster response.

A chance encounter between two Haitian IRSC students and friends attending a disaster response seminar in Tampa resulted in high praise for the CERT program reaching the Haitian Minister of Youth, Sports and Civic Action.

"We told them we learned more in a weekend here than we learned in two weeks in Tampa," said Jean Charles, an IRSC student who served as translator and facilitator for the group.

As a result, the minister contacted IRSC.

"Now, the Minister of Justice is interested in training law enforcement students here," Huntsberger said.

James Parent, a fire instructor and one of the faculty likely headed to Haiti in the coming weeks, said the program has stressed team-building exercises, as the eight trainees found out when they spent a morning moving a 375-pound concrete boulder from atop a pile of rubble.

Kerby Marcellus, one of the Haitian trainees, said it was a great honor to be chosen for the program and he was ready to return home and get to work.

"We are not all from Port-au-Prince (the nation's capital), but from all over the country. We were chosen based on our abilities and will now go back and start training people in all the major cities, such as Cap-Haitien where I am from," he said.



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