

New Web-based relief tools emerging to help Haiti

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Tim Schwartz, a 28-year-old artist and programmer, poses in his art studio on the campus of the University of California-San Diego, where he helped develop a data base for persons missing in the Haiti earthquake, Tuesday, Jan. 19, 2010, in San Diego. (AP Photo/Lenny Ignelzi)

(AP) -- Hundreds of tech volunteers spurred to action by Haiti's killer quake are adding a new dimension to disaster relief, developing new tools and services for first responders and the public in an unprecedented effort.

"It really is amazing the change in the way crisis response can be done now," said Noel Dickover, a Washington, D.C.-based organizer of the CrisisCamp tech volunteer movement, which is central to the [Haiti](#) effort. "Developers, crisis mappers and even Internet-savvy folks can actually make a difference."

Volunteers have built and refined software for tracking missing people, mapping the disaster area and enabling urgent cell phone text messaging. Organizations including the International Red Cross and the U.S. Federal Emergency Management Agency have put the systems to use.

Tim Schwartz, a 28-year-old artist and programmer in San Diego, feared that with an array of [social-networking sites](#), crucial information about Haitian quake victims would "go everywhere on the Internet and it would be very hard to actually find people - and get back to their loved ones," he said. So Schwartz quickly e-mailed "all the developers I'd ever worked with."

In a few hours, he and 10 others had built www.haitianquake.com , an online lost-and-found to help Haitians in and out of the country locate missing relatives.

The database, which anyone can update, was online less than 24 hours after the quake struck, with more than 6,000 entries because Schwartz and his colleagues wrote an "scraper" that gathered data from a Red Cross site.

The New York Times, Miami Herald, CNN and others launched similar efforts. And two days later, [Google](#) had a similar tool running, PersonFinder, that the State Department promoted on its own Web site and Twitter. PersonFinder grew out of missing-persons technology developed after [Hurricane Katrina](#) ravaged New Orleans in 2005.

Christopher Csikszentmihalyi, director of the Center for Future Civic Media at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, advocated online for consolidating all such tools into the Google version so the information wouldn't be stuck in competing projects.

He considers PersonFinder, which can be embedded in any Web site and

as of Tuesday had more than 32,000 records, a triumph because it "greatly increases the chances that Haitians in Haiti and abroad will be able to find each other."

Schwartz agreed and folded his database into PersonFinder, which he thinks will become "THE application for missing people for this disaster and all disasters in the future."

The site has received several hundred thousand visits, said Google spokeswoman Elaine Filadelfo. She had no data on how many people had found loved ones using the tool.

Another volunteer project forged in the quake's aftermath is a cell phone text-messaging system that has helped the Red Cross and other relief groups dispatch rescuers, food and water. Haitians needing help can send free text messages from phones on the nation's Digicel service to the number 4636.

"At least 20 people so far have been able to use this program to tell their families in the U.S. that they're OK," said Katie Stanton, a former Google employee working in the State Department's Office of Innovation.

The text messages are translated, categorized and "geotagged" by volunteers including Haitian-American members of the New York City-based Service Employees International Union. The service is being promoted on Haitian radio stations and the service has handled more than 1,000 messages since it began Saturday, said Josh Nesbit, a co-creator. He put together a similar system for hospitals in Malawi, Africa, while at Stanford University.

In another collaborative effort, the OpenStreetMap "crisis mapping" project, volunteers layer up-to-the-minute data (such as the location of

new field hospitals and downed bridges) onto post-quake satellite imagery that companies including GeoEye and DigitalGlobe have made freely available. The digital cartography - informed by everything from Twitter feeds to eyewitness reports - has helped aid workers speed food, water and medicine to where it's needed most.

One Colombian rescue team leader uploaded the maps to his crew's portable GPS units before the team arrived on the scene last week, developers said. Another volunteer, Talbot Brooks of Delta State University in Cleveland, Miss., converts the maps into letter-sized documents that aid workers have been printing out before traveling to the quake zone.

Internet social networking tools have helped volunteers organize intense work sessions.

CrisisCamp drew some 400 people in six cities including Washington, London and Mountain View, Calif., over the weekend to meet-ups where they devised, built and helped refine tools. Among them: a basic Creole-English dictionary for the iPhone that was delivered to Apple on Monday night for its approval.

"There was no break for lunch and people barely used the bathroom," said Clay Johnson of the Sunlight Foundation, the government transparency-promoting tech nonprofit that hosted the 130 participants in the Washington session. U.N., State Department and World Bank representatives attended.

Johnson also is the coordinator for "We Have, We Need," a project that was hatched in the CrisisCamp session and is about to be launched. It seeks to pair private-sector offers with needs identified by aid workers. For example, a Haitian Internet provider needs networking engineers to restore connectivity. Any volunteers willing to spend a few weeks in Port-

au-Prince?

More CrisisCamps are planned this weekend in Northern California, Miami, Atlanta, Washington, Atlanta, Brooklyn, N.Y., Portland, Ore., and Los Angeles.

A week after the [quake](#), many tech relief volunteers are still working full steam.

"These people have been awake for days," Csikszentmihalyi said.

On the Net:

Google's service: haiticrisis.appspot.com

CrisisCamps: bit.ly/5OSSAL

Mapping of text messages: haiti.usahidi.com/main

OpenStreetMap: bit.ly/67MDM9

U.S. State Department: tinyurl.com/y9pc77p

A Haiti disaster response portal: haiti.sahanafoundation.org

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