

Birthing kits save mothers' lives in Haiti

By Ashley Csanady, Record staff

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WATERLOO — For less than the price of a cup of coffee, a local women's group is saving the lives of mothers in Haiti.

Members of the Zonta Club of Kitchener-Waterloo spent Saturday morning packing pocket-sized birthing kits into zip-lock bags. About 35 women joined in sending off 1,000 life-saving kits.

The simple kits, which include a razor, latex gloves, soap, umbilical tape, gauze and a plastic sheet on which to lie, can be enough to save both mother and baby from deadly infection.

"Giving them a chance at a safer birth seemed like something we could do," said Muriel Omand-Naylor. She said her group has packaged 4,000 kits over the past year, with the bulk going to partner organizations in Haiti such as the Mennonite Central Committee, and 1,000 going to Nicaragua.

About 500,000 people die in childbirth around the world each year. That's about one woman every minute.

And "Haiti had the highest maternal mortality rate in the Western Hemisphere before the (January 2010) earthquake, at 630 per 100,000 live births. The rate after the earthquake is unknown, and there is a lack of effective tracking of maternal or infant deaths in the camps," according to a report on maternal health in Haiti by the non-governmental group Human Rights Watch.

And in a country such as Haiti with high HIV/AIDS infection rates, the birthing kits also provide much-needed protection for caregivers.

"There's an overall absence of health care in Haiti, and this was true before the earthquake," said Andrew Thompson, adjunct assistant professor of political science at the University of Waterloo and a program officer in global governance programs at the Balsillie School of International Affairs.

He said efforts such as the birthing kits are effective because they're cheap, easy to distribute and have an immediate impact — especially because the kits are distributed to women training to become midwives.

"These kits are important, but the ability to use them effectively is just as important," Thompson said.

"Anything that can build internal capacity is really important," he said, explaining that because knowledge is being passed on with the kits, it increases their value. Even if a non-governmental organization (NGO) leaves, the local community has still gained invaluable training.

"Doing it at the local level can be even more effective because the state is so absent," Thompson added.



Birthing kits. Jackie Wendland (left) and Moni Lagonia were among a group of KW Zonta club members making 1000 birthing kits at First United Church in Waterloo, Saturday. The kits will be distributed by the Mennonite Central committee in Haiti. Mathew McCarthy/The Record Source: The Record

But Thompson, who co-edited the recent book *Fixing Haiti: MINUSTAH and Beyond*, said it will take more than donor dollars and birthing kits to repair the Caribbean nation. (MINUSTAH is the French acronym for the UN Stabilization Mission in Haiti.)

"One of the criticisms of Haiti is that there's essentially an NGO industry," which was the case well before the earthquake, Thompson said.

He explained that Haiti needs to start providing services to its citizens to build faith in the fledgling government elected after the earthquake, but because the state has failed them for so long that trust is deeply broken.

"If you don't foster that social contract, then there's no level of allegiance to the state," said Thompson.

While non-governmental organizations provide much-needed short-term relief and save lives, in the long-run they end up perpetuating Haiti's dependence on foreign aid.

"In this case (the birthing kits), lives are being saved and that's really important and we can't lose sight of that," said Thompson. "It is a real challenge. How do you build up capacity in a meaningful way without losing out in the short term?"

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