

The Boston Globe

Devices deliver faster help to victims of disaster



A Global Relief team member relays data about a Haitian man who lost part of a leg. (Global Relief Technologies)

By [Dave Copeland](#)

Globe Correspondent / February 8, 2010

Adam Cote served in Bosnia and Iraq, so he knows what it is like to be around death and destruction. But the former Army officer says those experiences did not prepare him for the carnage and mass destruction he saw in Haiti last month after the earthquake.

“The damage was the worst I had ever seen. And the human toll . . .” Cote said, his voice trailing off. “The high number of casualties is just unbelievable.

Cote was part of a team of volunteers sent to collect data on casualties and infrastructure damage following the 7.0-magnitude earthquake. He said the task was made easier because of technology developed by his employer, Global Relief Technologies Inc., of Portsmouth, N.H.

It’s a company that has patented a software system designed to help rescue workers and volunteers gather and process information during humanitarian crises.

Using hand-held computers loaded with Global Relief software, Cote, a senior vice president at the company, and his team of five conducted 750 damage assessments and 150 patient assessments in seven days.

They were able to snap photos and quickly ascertain such details as the type of building, the number of people served, and the severity of the damage. The information was instantly transferred to a website for review by government officials.

Even before last month's earthquake, Haiti, the hemisphere's poorest nation, had a high percentage of amputees: now there are tens of thousands more. The team from Global Relief is also working with New England Brace Co., of Hooksett, N.H., and with Healing Hands for Haiti, a nonprofit organization with offices in Salt Lake City.

Cote and his colleagues used a 12-question medical assessment; they also collected contact information for follow-up care. Healing Hands transmitted the data to prosthetics companies around the world that may be able to supply artificial limbs.

Global Relief is the brainchild of Michael Gray, a former US Department of State official who grew frustrated with efforts to collect data in Serbia in 1998 and in Afghanistan in 2001.

"What typically happens is CNN shows up and documents the failures, and people in Washington get upset, so they try to apply a 3,000-mile screwdriver to fix things," Gray said. "Our objective is to empower the field worker."

Changing the mindset of the nongovernmental organizations that typically respond to disasters, however, has proven to be difficult, Gray said.

The company got a big boost in 2008, when the American Red Cross used the devices instead of its antiquated pen-and-paper system after flooding in Iowa.

Gray is hoping Global Relief's work in Haiti will raise its technology's profile higher. ■