

Volunteers assemble birthing kits for Haiti

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Assembled in a kit, one plastic sheet, five pieces of gauze, a bar of soap, three ties of string, two latex gloves and a razor blade cost just under \$2 - but in the hands of a skilled midwife, such a kit can save upwards of three lives.

On Saturday, June 4, the Zonta Club of Toronto teamed up with volunteers from Etobicoke's Ukrainian Canadian Care Centre to assemble 1,000 birthing kits for distribution in Haiti.

The kits are essential for midwives who struggle every day to deliver babies in non-sterile conditions, where simple items such as a piece of soap or a sterile razor blade can often mean the difference between life and death for both mothers and their babies, said Zonta Club of Toronto President Nita McCown.

As such, she said the birthing kit project was a "great fit" for Zonta Club, which is a worldwide service organization of business and professional executives dedicated to advancing the status of women all over the world through service and advocacy.

"Very often what happens is, when you belong to a group like Zonta, it's really easy to write a cheque, but it's not as fulfilling as taking action. You feel good about contributing, but this was a very hands-on project that we could work on together," McCown said, noting that it took volunteers (including 30 Zonta members, and four residents and eight volunteers of the care centre) just a little over two hours to assemble all 1,000 kits.

According to UNICEF, nearly 1,000 women die worldwide each day because of complications related to pregnancy and childbirth, and 99 per cent of those deaths occur in developing countries, such as Haiti.

In order to get the birthing kits on the ground in the country - which is still recovering from a January 2010 earthquake that killed more than 200,000 and injured more than 300,000 others - Zonta Club enlisted the help of The Mennonite Central Committee, McCown said.

"We had to be very careful to select a group to help us get the kits to people who need them on the ground," she said. "So we're shipping through the Mennonite Central Committee, because they have contact with medical personnel in Haiti and have been training midwives to use them."

McCown thanked donors - including The Fairmont Royal York and Medical Mart - as well as the residents and volunteers of the Ukrainian Canadian Care Centre, where the kits were assembled, for "stepping up to the plate" and for "understanding both the scale of the problem and that a few key items in a plastic bag can save a life."



Volunteers assemble birthing kits for Haiti. Volunteers from the Zonta Club of Toronto and the Ukrainian Canadian Care Centre joined forces this past weekend to assemble 1,000 birthing kits destined for Haiti. The kits include a plastic sheet, latex gloves, soap, gauze, ties and a razor blade, and are essential to midwives working in developing countries. *Courtesy Photo*

As for the Ukrainian Canadian Care Centre volunteers, they were just happy to help out, said Executive Director Sandy Lomaszewycz.

"Our residents and volunteers were excited at the chance to contribute to those less fortunate and are happy to assist in this important effort by Zonta," she said in a statement.

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