

## Haitian enclave in Queens pitches in

By [Hilary Potkewitz](#) Published: January 24, 2010 - 5:59 am

At Duch Travel Agency in Cambria Heights, Queens, the phone has been ringing off the hook. The agency, which in happier times specializes in Haitian vacations, is busier than ever these days fielding calls from area residents trying to book flights to help out or to join the search for loved ones.



But since no commercial airlines are flying to Port-au-Prince, all travel agent Philippe Charlot can do is cross his fingers and book them on flights that are days or weeks away.

“Delta and American Airlines told me that ‘maybe’ flights will start again Tuesday,” says Mr. Charlot. “I can see the availability in the [reservation] system, and I can book the tickets, but even the airlines say they’re not sure if the flights will happen or not.”

In Cambria Heights, where one in four businesses along busy Linden Boulevard are Haitian-owned, business as usual came to a near standstill when news of the devastating earthquake broke. Residents struggled to check on relatives, information was slow to come, and all people could do was wait.

“For the first two days, everyone was in shock,” says Kevin Jemmott, president of the Cambria Heights Development Corp. “Things are just now starting to come together.”

And how. Haitian Americans United for Progress, a cultural center that serves those of Caribbean descent, has extended its hours during the crisis. Even with staff working around the clock to help area residents find relatives, work through immigration paperwork and gather donations, the center is swamped with new requests every day.

### Can't wire money

Meanwhile, an employee at the Chase branch on Linden Boulevard reports that dozens of customers inquire daily about wiring money to Haiti, only to be told that the banking system there isn't capable of receiving right now. Chase is advising people that so far, there's been no word on when money transfer services will be back up and running.

With so many links between Haiti and the outside world now either severed or badly damaged, individual business owners in Cambria Heights took matters into their own hands.

Dr. Marie Dupiton, who runs Camp Kids Pediatrics, a local pediatric clinic, started gathering clothes and first aid supplies there and at local women's fitness center Ener-G, which she owns. Last week, she flew to the Dominican Republic and boarded a bus to make the long overland journey to Haiti to deliver the goods she'd collected.

Duch Travel Agency, which has long offered goods-shipping services to Haiti, has been inundated with donations of goods and clothing since the disaster struck. But with no commercial cargo flights on which to send the parcels, the agency has had to start turning away donations. "The basement is packed. The storage room is packed. You should see the hallway," says Mr. Charlot. "It's quite sad to tell people we can't take any more, but we really can't take any more."

## **Coordinating the response**

Mr. Jemmott's organization is now trying to coordinate various individual efforts. He's going door to door along Linden Boulevard, talking to Haitian business owners to find out what their customers' needs are, and what the merchants' needs are when it comes to helping family and friends back in Haiti.

"We need to put together a plan with the Haitian businesses here, to see what we can do as a group," he says, adding, "I envision that for the next several years, the businesses here will be very involved with the from-the-ground-up effort down there."