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West Palm rep: State needs 'Haiti czar,' better prep for Haitian diaspora

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Worried about an influx of Haitian immigrants into South Florida's already crowded schools and hospitals, state lawmakers from the region are banding together to figure out how to help the state, and the victims, better cope with the aftermath of the earthquake.

Newly elected state Rep. Mack Bernard, one of only three Haitian-born legislators, is heading Palm Beach County's effort in a legislative task force created Tuesday night at meeting of lawmakers from Miami-Dade, Broward and Palm Beach counties.

A lack of communication between state, federal and international agencies and aid organizations is creating a major stumbling block in getting a handle on how to plan for and respond to the ravages of the natural disaster, said Bernard, who traveled to his homeland last week.

Gov. Charlie Crist should appoint a "Haiti czar" to streamline efforts that could be an economic boon to financially-strapped Florida, Bernard, D-West Palm Beach, suggested.

Crist contacted Bernard, whose sister and three children are living in the streets after their home was destroyed in the earthquake, on the night of the disaster, but Bernard said he has not heard from the governor since.

"It's that lack of communication, especially from the governor's office" that is creating frustration for representatives from the tri-county area, which has the state's largest Haitian immigrant population and is now on the front line providing aid and resources to the ravaged nation, Bernard said.

Bernard, who was raised in Delray Beach after leaving Haiti at age 10, said his office and that of fellow Haitian-American state Reps. Yolly Roberson, D-Miami, and Ronald Brise, D-North Miami, have been barraged by telephone calls and e-mails from school officials worried about what's in store and constituents seeking missing family members.

While administration officials including Department of Children and Families Secretary George Sheldon say Florida will not be inundated by Haitian migrants seeking refuge, Bernard says, "I don't think that's realistic" and predicts a massive diaspora.

The task force will likely consist of about 12 lawmakers — four from each of the three counties — and may divide areas of concern such as immigration, adoption and clean-up to make it easier for legislators and other officials to get information, Bernard said.

The Haitian government, the White House and various U.S. agencies (including Health and Human Services, the Department of Defense and Homeland Security), and numerous international groups such as the United Nations are all responding to the crisis. And until now, Florida has been ground zero for more than 20,000 individuals entering the United States, many of whom are in need of medical help.

"Florida's been at the forefront of all of that," said Sheldon. "There are a hundred moving parts. This is a logistical challenge. It's a logistical challenge just getting aircraft in and out of Port au-Prince and coordinating when they're going to land."

He said the federal government will pay all of the costs for Haitians who are not eligible for Medicaid. But unless Congress acts, the state will have to pay a large portion of Medicaid for eligible Haitians — those with children, the elderly or blind.

Sheldon said the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services Secretary Kathleen Sebelius assured him she

would ask Congress to pick up the state's tab for Medicaid expenses related to treating Haitian victims.

But other questions remain, Bernard said. What will happen to children in the United States whose parents' visas expire six months from now? What will the state do about the possible hundreds of thousands of orphans? Is Florida prepared for a mass migration?

"This task force can be a catalyst to address different issues," Bernard said.

The disaster could provide relief for Florida, where unemployment is approaching 12 percent and lawmakers are facing a \$3 billion budget gap between projected revenues and expected expenses in the 2010-2011 budget year.

Florida businesses could get contracts with the Haitian government and aid organizations to clean up debris and begin rebuilding once those efforts begin.

"We want guidance from the governor's office because this could be a job-creation effort for Florida," he said.

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