

2/4/10 Chronicle of Philanthropy: Web Site Aims to Evaluate Charities' Haiti Work

Web Site Aims to Evaluate Charities' Haiti Work By Caroline Preston
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Americans have donated hundreds of millions to help charities repair Haiti. How can they find out if the money is being well spent?

A new Web site seeks to fill that role. ReliefOversight.org, built in two weeks by more than 50 volunteers, aims to use crowdsourcing to gather information on what charities are doing in Haiti, whether they're qualified to do the work, and if concerns are being raised about their efforts.

Aid workers and others on the ground in Haiti are being encouraged to provide feedback on the site about what they're witnessing. They can choose to do so anonymously; such comments will be reviewed by volunteers before they are posted to the site.

The Web site's organizers will also try to gather information from public and internal reports that charities complete on their work.

Ben Smilowitz, founder of the Disaster Accountability Project, a nonprofit group that undertook the Web project, calls aid "one of the most unchecked industries."

"The public really has no way of knowing whether what they're hearing is complete, or if it's just the good stuff that is being put out there by public-relations firms or communications departments," he says, noting that some charities raising money for Haiti haven't even set foot in the country yet.

Whether the site proves useful will depend largely on its organizers' ability to convince enough people to submit information. Mr. Smilowitz says he'll be trying to spread the word among people at relief groups.

If the Web site is successful, he hopes it can be adapted to other emergencies and aid work in other parts of the world.

But even if it doesn't work well, Mr. Smilowitz says that just getting charity officials talking about the need to share more information "may lead to stronger transparency practices for aid and relief groups."