

Nurses eager to help Haiti, but South Florida hospitals can spare only some of staff

Those who have been there urge volunteers not to forget

By Bob LaMendola, Sun Sentinel

Thousands of nurses are ready to volunteer in Haiti or come to South Florida to relieve health care workers who want to travel to the [earthquake](#)-torn island.

And that's just from National Nurses United. Many other nurses and doctors worldwide are lining up to help, officials said. They're just waiting for the call.

"I watch it on the TV and I think, 'Why not me, why can't I go there and give my support?' I feel so bad," said Haiti native Marie Arice Chanty, a Miramar resident and an intensive care nurse at Jackson Memorial Hospital. "But I understand I have to wait."

So many South Florida nurses with ties to Haiti have clamored to go that hospitals and other health care providers say they would be left short-staffed if all went. To cope, institutions are designing rotations to let a few volunteers go at a time.

In light of the ongoing nursing shortage in Florida and nationwide, institutions have just enough staffers to meet their needs and have less flexibility to let people take vacation to volunteer in Haiti.

For example, more than 200 of 4,000 nurses at Jackson Memorial have asked to go, according to the Service Employees International Union, as have dozens of the 600 Haiti-born employees at Miami Jewish Health System, a nursing home and assisted living complex in Miami's Little Haiti.

"We have to strike a balance between letting people go help out and see their relatives, and the needs of our residents here for their regular care," said Blaise Mercadante, chief marketing officer at Miami Jewish.

The same thing is happening at hospitals, nursing homes, home health agencies and clinics in Broward and Palm Beach counties with significant Haitian workforces.

Pembroke Pines nurse Barry Thompson, a Haiti native and Jackson Memorial emergency room staffer, got the call. He left Tuesday for a one-week stint in Port-au-Prince.

"I understand where the administration was coming from making us wait, but I just wanted to go there and do my part," Thompson said. "I'm so glad I'm finally getting a chance."

To help free Haiti volunteers without crippling hospitals, the state is setting up a system to let out-of-state nurses with clean records relieve them without the lengthy process of getting a Florida license.

So far, only nine nurses have finished the paperwork to do fill-in stints in Florida, but state and hospital officials said more should be coming soon.

The SEIU is trying to arrange free airline tickets and lodging so non-Floridians who spend vacations volunteering in the state don't have to pay out of pocket to do so, said Martha Baker, president of SEIU Local 1991 in South Florida.

Good thing, say doctors and nurses who have been to Haiti. The need is gargantuan.

"What I'm really worried about is when Haiti is not the hot subject," said Davie nurse Anssie Blot, a member of the Haitian American Nurses Association board. Blot has done two stints in Haiti. "The first week it was big, but already I can see it fading. We can't let it fade away."