USF team helped Bahamas with emergency response to Hurricane Isabel

By Anne DeLotto Baier

As Hurricane Isabel whipped into a formidable storm in the Atlantic, two staff members from the USF Global Center for Disaster Management and Humanitarian Action were deployed to the Bahamas to help with the country’s emergency response to the hurricane.

George Buck Jr., PhD, associate professor of public health and Global-CDMHA director of education and training, and Erin Hughey, MA, research associate and instructor, left Tampa Sept. 13 for Nassau. They were stationed at the National Emergency Operations Center in Nassau with cell phones, satellite equipment and meals ready to eat (MRE).

Originally on a path that would have brought full fury of its 160 mph winds through Nassau, Isabel ended up veering northward toward the North Carolina coast so that it struck only some of the Bahamas’ remote outer islands. Heavy rain and winds caused beach erosion, but no infrastructure damage, Dr. Buck said.

Even so, the USF team worked with Bahamian emergency preparedness and defense officials, public works personnel, firefighters and police to activate the country’s emergency operations center for 24 hours as Isabel battered the outer islands. The Bahamian officials held
conference calls with disaster management officials in the outer islands and regular press briefings. Consisting of hundreds of small islands, the Bahamas lacks inland evacuation sites, but has developed shelters and a well-defined system for distributing emergency supplies, Hughey said.

“We were there strictly as support. It was their disaster plan to implement,” said Dr. Buck, who returned with Hughey to Tampa late Sept. 16. “They did a good job of putting all the training we did into operation.”

For the last year, the Global-CDMHA has been working with the Bahamas, a key tourism destination for the American and European cruise industries, on its emergency preparedness plan for natural and manmade disasters. Dr. Buck and Hughey taught a course in Biological Terrorism Preparedness to health and defense workers there in June 2002.

“Our center continues to be committed to interdisciplinary research and education programs that are applicable to all types of disasters,” said Thomas J. Mason, professor of epidemiology and director of the Global-CDMHA. “We’re there to help countries respond, communicate and regroup during times of real risk for personal injury, property damage and adverse economic impact.”

The Global-CDMHA, housed in the USF College of Public Health, is funded by $2.5 million a year from the U.S. Navy. The Center facilitates collaborative education, information management, research and communication between disaster response and humanitarian assistance agencies, military and civilian, primarily across the Western hemisphere.