### Things to keep in mind while working with Haitian Families

* Given the lack of rehabilitation programs in Haiti, clients and their families may have limited understanding of what the possibilities are for rehabilitation. They may need to be convinced that a mental disability does not mean "permanent failure" (as one Haitian parent put it). Clients and their families need to be informed about programs and supports.
* Potential clients and their families need to be introduced to new ways of looking at disability. For example, the nature of emotional or behavioral disabilities needs to be explained to clients or their families before they agree to start rehabilitation.
* Clients and their families will have to be encouraged to be proactive during the rehabilitation process. Providers should be explicit about being asked questions. It may be necessary to model asking the kind of questions that make for better service.
* Consumers and their families may expect quick results and benefits. They will discontinue a program if they think that it is a failure. If results are not what the consumers expect, they will feel deceived and not provided for. From the first meeting, it should be emphasized that rehabilitation is not quick. The results of the program, and how these results can be recognized, should be explained.
* Take time to review the documentation that will be necessary for clients and their families to have and maintain. Read the list of required documents with the clients and families, rather than suggesting that they read it at home on their own. Explain the need for each document and stress that service may be impaired if proper documentation is not provided when requested.
* Be aware of issues related to the prestige of French within the Haitian community. For example, a request for a French interpreter does not necessarily indicate fluency in French. At the same time, a client may be offended if you begin by offering a Kreyòl interpreter. Understanding a clients true linguistic background and current needs is necessary.
* If a Haitian client arrives late, it is appropriate to provide service at that time. However, it should be stressed that the expectation is that they arrive on time. While some accommodation may be made, providers should be explicit about their policies. This is also true about unscheduled visits.

### Interpersonal Interactions

* As with all consumers, trust is a key issue. One way to establish trust is to sympathize with the pressures that Haitian immigrants are facing. Acknowledging the specific stressors that exist (language issues, being separated from extended family, etc.) calms a Haitian consumers fears. Just listening without saying anything brings positive benefits.
* Be sensitive to the specifics of Haitian identity. Recognize Haitians as distinct from other Caribbean people, and distinct from African Americans. Note that all creoles are not alike. Do not confuse Haitian Creole (a French–based Creole) with Capeverdean Criolu (a Portuguese–based Creole). Many Haitians report being frustrated with service providers who do not have a clear sense of who they are and where they come from.
* Be sensitive to religious topics and be aware that religion may arise in any conversation. Consumers may expect you to share their views about God's role in rehabilitation ("God willing") and the value of prayer. For this reason, you will need to be comfortable talking about religiou issues, regardless of how you feel. At the same time, do not preface your comments with thoughts about religion. Wait for the consumer to introduce the topic. Remind yourself not to assume or generalize. This is particularly true regarding voodoo. While some Haitians embrace voodoo history and faith, it is a sensitive topic. It is best not to ask questions about it with clients that you do not know very well. You may come across as yet another non–Haitian who wants to find out about zombies.

Family Structure

* The Haitian family and community have been described as transnational (Laguerre, 1998). The suggestion is that Haitians in the United States do not identify themselves solely as residents of America or of Haiti, but instead live a life that bridges both countries.
* Families are transnational in this sense, since family members will shift back and forth between the two countries. **Children may have one parent in each country .**
* In Haiti, households often consist of multiple generations. Adult siblings (and their families) may live together in a common space. The Haitian lakay (home) is geared towards the needs and strengths of **the extended family**. Usually, individuals do not dream of owning a house that is separate from their family.
* This preference for extended families living together causes problems for Haitian immigrants in the United States who **cannot replicate** their Haitian living arrangements due to economic pressures. It is not always possible for Haitian families to find places where they can all live together under one roof.
* Haitian parents in the United States **may send their children to Haiti during difficult times**, or if they feel that the child is misbehaving or picking up bad behavioral habits in the United States.
* Men are considered to be the breadwinners. Their responsibility is to find paying work to support the family**. At home, men typically do not get involved in childcare.**
* For this reason, men do not usually interact with the school system regarding their childrens education. **Both parents may consider education to be the job of schools and not the parents.**

View of Disability

When an individual has a disability, any decisions about rehabilitation are made by the family as a whole. Each member of the extended family is consulted. The preference is to address the needs of the individual with the disability through a support system within the family itself. There are times when individuals do not go beyond the family support system to explore other options for rehabilitation. They remain solely in the care of the family. If they seek help outside of the family structure, they typically choose from two options: religious or institution–based rehabilitation.

Popular believes and Disability

* After a woman gives birth to a child with a disability, the father of the child may intentionally go out and impregnate another woman. He believes that if the second woman gives birth to a "normal" child, this provides evidence that the first **childs disability is a function of that childs mother rather than himself.**
* This behavior takes place in the United States, as well. During community meetings for Haitian families that have children with disabilities, **the vast majority of the participants will be women.**
* For disability service providers who work with Haitians it is imperative to understand the Haitian perspectives on the nature of disability, including the shame and social stigma that are often attached to those individuals in Haitian community who have disabilities.
* These attitudes prevent Haitian families from seeking support and social inclusion of their sons and daughters in community activities and programs.
* Families may never take advantage of social programs and services that are available. Many of these children become socially isolated, and the families live a life apart from their community
* It is rare for people in Haiti to discuss disabilities whether acquired or lifelong. **Disabilities are thought of as mysterious and dangerous.** Typically, disabilities are perceived as having origins in the interaction of the natural and supernatural worlds, rather than being a medical issue.
* Disability may also be the result of **a spell cast by an enemy**. In this case, a disability may be a sign that the disabled individual mistreated someone else.
* **Regardless of religious orientation, disabilities are seen as supernatural in origin**
* Since people are afraid of disabilities and believe them to be a type of supernatural punishment, many parents **keep their disabled children away from the public view. They do not want to expose their children to public ridicule, mocking or teasing.**
* Haitian parents have been described as overprotective with regard to both typical children and those with special needs.
* Parents feel that **these children cannot do anything** and that they must do everything for them. This is especially the case with physical disabilities.
* A better understanding of the nature of the social stigma that parents and children live with will also allow non–Haitian professionals to join forces with Haitian colleagues who are attempting to change their communities attitudes towards disability.

Education

* In America, Haitian immigrants with enough resources continue to send their children to Catholic schools or other private schools. Low-income families (whose children did not attend school in Haiti or who had limited schooling) rely upon the public school system. These parents are concerned about placing students in classes based upon age rather than on educational experience and abilities. Without special considerations, they sense that the gaps in their childrens education will never be filled.
* Regardless of social class, Haitian parents share a perspective on education that differs from what is expected in the United States. Haitian parents trust schools and teachers completely. They do not believe that they have a role in their childrens education.
* They tend not to ask questions of people in authority. They are not accustomed to being proactive regarding their childs schooling and may not understand requests to attend meetings with teachers or administrators unless their child is in trouble.
* From the Haitian parents perspective, education is the responsibility of the school while discipline and moral development is the responsibility of the parents.
* In general, Haitian parents place a high value on education and have very high expectations of schools. Many immigrate to the United States in order to give their children a chance at a good education.
* For many Haitian immigrants, ethnic identity within the United States is not the defining element of their lives. At times, they identify as an ethnic minority (Haitian) and at other times they identify as black.
* Many Haitians see no contradiction in calling themselves Christians while engaging in voodoo practices
* **Voodoo** is a mixture of African and Haitian beliefs. It has a complex cosmology made up of a large number of supernatural spirits. These spirits are believed to have great influence on human beings and for that reason, they must be respected.
* The term in Kreyòl for a spirit is lwa. Each family has a lwa associated with it. Daily life is conducted according to what would make these spirits happy. Voodoo practitioners believe lwa make their desires clear by possessing someone and speaking through them.
* Often lwa will ask a mother to dedicate their newborn or unborn child to them. If the lwa's request is not honored, the lwa may possibly punish the mother or child by giving them a disability.

Communication

* Within Haitian culture, oral forms of communication are preferred over written. Communication often takes place on audiotape rather than through letters. Word of mouth (teledjòl in Kreyòl) is used to disseminate a wide range of information from gossip to political analysis.

***Reference:***

**Jacobson, Erik, (In collaboration with the staff and families of the Haitian Family Support Program) (2003). *An Introduction to Haitian Culture for Rehabilitation Service Providers*.** Center for International Rehabilitation Research Information and Exchange (CIRRIE).