By David R. Baker
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By the time Lynn Fritz visited Baghdad’s Sheik Omar medical center, there wasn’t much left.

Looters had stripped out air conditioners, files, even sinks. Doctors had to work without many of the basic materials they needed.

Fritz, a longtime San Francisco businessman who helped pioneer modern logistics and shipping, may be able to help. He runs a 2-year-old nonprofit that assists humanitarian groups in gathering and moving supplies, as well as finding private-sector help for their projects. Postwar Iraq may become the Fritz Institute’s first big test.

Fritz and the institute’s managing director, Anisya Thomas, toured Baghdad in late June with several nonprofit agencies working to bring medicine and clean water to the Iraqi people.

The institute has not yet decided which specific needs to tackle first. But after seeing the bleak conditions under which humanitarian groups
must work in Iraq, Fritz said he is certain the institute will be involved.

"It won't be overpowering," he said, noting that San Francisco's Bechtel Corp. already has been hired by the federal government to handle the largest reconstruction jobs. "Becthel's going to be doing the heavy work. But we're going to give a whole variety of helping hands there. I'm glad we made the trip."

Fritz has decades of experience moving goods from point A to point B, regardless of obstacles. Before starting the institute, he led the Fritz Cos., a commercial logistics firm his father founded in Chinatown in 1933.

Such firms navigate the bureaucratic labyrinth all exports and imports face before they reach their destinations. They handle the paperwork of customs and ensure that goods move smoothly from railways to ships to airplanes. As one of the world's largest logistics firms, the Fritz Cos. grew to more than $600 million in annual sales, with offices in 120 countries.

Two years ago, United Parcel Service bought the Fritz Cos. for $433 million in stock, and Fritz turned his attention to the nonprofit world. Over the years, he had seen natural disasters disrupt operations for some of his firm's overseas offices. He realized that big humanitarian crises invariably demand the mobilization of relief supplies from many countries — exactly the kind of operation he knew how to run.

That insight lay behind the Fritz Institute's creation. The institute's first project was devising a software program to help humanitarian groups locate, move and track goods needed in emergencies.

In Iraq, Fritz found humanitarian workers enduring conditions that verged on chaos. The country's infrastructure — the power, water and sewer systems most people take for granted — had decayed under the international sanctions that followed the 1991 Gulf War. Then came the U.S.-led invasion, followed by systematic looting and spasms of violence.

The looting, he said, has crippled the country and threatens to undo repairs made by the humanitarian groups.

"It's not really looting. It's really dismantling," Fritz said. "There's a big distinction, and a very telling one."

Although Bechtel and other large private companies have received more attention, nonprofit groups have been part of Iraq's reconstruction since the invasion. Some began distributing medicine and food during the fighting that led to Saddam Hussein's ouster. They have fanned out across the country, trying to help Iraqis even in smaller towns far removed from Baghdad and Basra.

Groups like CARE International struggle to keep water lines running and hospitals open. CARE took Fritz and Thomas to a hospital, a health care center and a water treatment plant on the Tigris River — all in need of help.

"They're a young foundation, and we thought it would be a good way to show them our work on the ground," said Grace Nicholas, CARE's media officer in Baghdad. "They were interested in coming here, and we were interested in having them."

The security problems plaguing Iraq's reconstruction are well beyond the Fritz Institute's ability to solve. The institute, however, could help gather materials for the humanitarian groups there — pressing the private sector to donate as much as possible — and bring those supplies to Iraq, Fritz said.

The relief workers deserve the support, he said.

Lynn Fritz toured Baghdad in late June with several nonprofit agencies working to bring medicine and clean water to the Iraqi people.

"You'll find a relatively large volunteer army of aid workers, young men and women, going over there with great risk to life and limb," he said. "These kids in the field are heroic, they're resourceful. They are the story."

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Fritz, director of the Fritz Institute, surveys the rubble of Baghdad two months after the war ended.