**Keeping special populations safe from missiles**

July 16, 2014

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Israel Ministry of Foreign Affairs

http://mfa.gov.il/MFA/AboutIsrael/Spotlight/Pages/Keeping-special-populations-safe-from-missiles-16-July-2014.aspx

When a Grad rocket fired from Gaza struck ALEH Negev-Nahalat Eran Rehabilitation Village in early July, all 160 severely disabled residents were moved into protective shelters with their beds and their essential medical and paramedical equipment. It’s not easy to accomplish this task while at the same time tending to the emotional needs of both residents and staff members.

The rain of rockets from Gaza, and the unpredictable air-raid sirens and “Code Red” missile alerts throughout the day and night, are difficult and stressful for all Israelis. But the challenges are magnified at facilities for people with disabilities and for the elderly.

This was the fifth time [ALEH Negev](http://www.aleh.org/eng/branch_negev.asp) was hit by missiles from the Gaza Strip since 2006, so the four-building complex already has a time-tested action plan to address the physical and emotional well-being of the residents, who range in age from infants to age 53 and have severe cognitive and physical disabilities.

“Despite the situation, we are strong and prepared and our spirit is upbeat,” said Masada Skely, director of the facility, the only one of four [ALEH](http://www.aleh.org/eng/index.asp) sites in Israel that cares for adults as well as children. It’s situated just west of Ofakim, a town that has seen its share of missile attacks.

“Emergency mode in the village works on several fronts – on the one hand, we provide for the safety of the residents and prepare special activities to keep them occupied, and on the other hand, we reinforce the staff and offer them moral support during this time,” says Skely.

That support includes opening a day camp for employees’ children so that the workers can continue coming to the village despite the closure of programs in their hometowns due to the ongoing rocket fire. ALEH Negev spokesman Avnet Kleiner relates that in 2006, many of the employees were too scared to come to work, and the facility was plunged into a crisis.

“We realized we must work on that challenge during peace time,” he says. A thorough reevaluation and reorganization of the staff resulted in a much lower absentee rate during the next round of rockets from Gaza in 2009, and during the current Operation Protective Edge (July 2014), 100 percent of the workers are showing up, supplemented by volunteers, reserve soldiers and National Service personnel. In fact, all 24 National Service women sleep on site at ALEH Negev rather than returning to the nearby communities where they are normally housed.

**Eldercare under fire**

Shlomit Ben-Noon, coordinator of the Senior Homes Management Program at Ariel University, says it is critical not just to have a planned-out method to move the elderly into safe areas during an attack, but to consider their emotional needs throughout the entire tense period.

“Older people have been through an awful lot in their lives,” says Ben-Noon, a PhD in gerontology who manages Beit Shalom in Tel Aviv, one of three senior residences run by the [Reuth](http://www.reuth.org/) eldercare, rehabilitation and social-welfare nonprofit. Beit Shalom houses 90 residents.

“The staff has to be sensitive to their needs and anxieties, especially because many of them are Holocaust survivors, war veterans and others who experienced personal tragedies,” she says.

“One of the most important things in dealing with elders in times of crisis is being aware of the strengths they’ve developed through their lives while also being well aware that within any life of strength there have been multiple crises. The most successful way for any professional and caring team to help the elderly is to understand them individually in the context of each one’s own life story.”

Part of the emotional care aspect is staying in regular touch with residents’ families about special protocols and activities at Beit Shalom in times of national conflict – to ease relatives’ fears and also to empower the loved ones to offer moral support.

Beit Shalom’s social worker and “house mothers” spend more time in one-on-one conversations with residents to screen for any distress signals such as changes in eating or sleeping habits. Additional seating has been placed in common areas and the independent residents are encouraged to come out of their apartments and congregate with other residents and staff members for a greater feeling of personal safety. If a Code Red alert is sounded, this arrangement also allows for smoother and faster transfer to safe rooms.

On a practical level, many considerations must be taken into account. Quite a few of the residents are hearing impaired, so Beit Shalom does not rely on the outdoor siren. Its in-house public-address system notifies residents when it’s time to go to the designated safe areas they have practiced accessing.

“They’ve all been prepared beforehand to get to the closest safe room calmly, because as important as it is to get to a secure area it’s equally important for them to stay safe while getting there,” says Ben-Noon. Indeed, throughout Israel some of the injuries suffered during missile attacks stemmed from people – particularly senior citizens -- falling while running to a bomb shelter.

Many of those in Beit Shalom’s nursing-care wing cannot be moved. “Where necessary, the staff takes turns staying with them in place,” Ben-Noon explains. “We have added additional staff where necessary to cover everyone.” She adds that one resident has become very afraid of leaving her apartment, “so we make sure she gets her meals in her room during these days of crisis.”

**Blind and multiply disabled children**

Keren Or, a Jerusalem school and therapeutic center for blind and multiply handicapped people ages three to 21, has its own unique challenges. It was not clear in the first days of Operation Protective Edge whether the center could even stay open.

“We now have permission to keep the school open and we have almost 100 percent attendance despite the fact that the children come from as far as Ra’anana,” director Tamara Silberberg wrote to supporters early on in the conflict.

“The challenge for Keren Or staff is particularly complex since Jerusalem is within Hamas rocket range and we need to bring the students into the protected rooms/bomb shelters within less than 90 seconds from the siren call,” she reported. “The students' psycho-emotional state requires fast professional reactions and exemplary discipline.”

The facility adopts an “all hands on deck” approach in times of crisis, as each student needs a high level of assistance. “They are so vulnerable, so dependent on reassuring hands,” says Silberberg.

Special activities in the summer, ranging from drumming to chocolate-making to animal therapy, must be held in small spaces that are no more than 90 seconds away from safe rooms.

Keren Or also has an assisted-living program for 35 residents aged 21 to 42. Silberberg relates that these blind and multiply disabled adults must sleep in the bomb shelter because their regular bedrooms are on the top floor. “They have their stir-crazy moments, and the logistics of physical care, limited facilities and sleeping on the floor is challenging,” the director relates.

Even hydrotherapy, an especially enjoyable and effective treatment for everyone at Keren Or, has been altered because of the situation. Therapists only use the side of the pool closest to the safe haven. The hydrotherapists and support staff have done practice drills to streamline the amount of time it takes to get a child out of the pool, wrapped in a towel and moved to safety without slipping. Gurneys are lined up at the pool’s edge for easier and faster transport.

**Routine is essential**

At ALEH Negev, the swimming pool had to be closed during the conflict because it is outdoors, says Kleiner.

However, an enormous effort was made to keep all regular indoor activities going on as usual because routine is of prime importance to ALEH’s population even under “normal” circumstances.

“During times of crisis, routines are essential to the health of the residents, whether it’s work or therapy,” says Kleiner.

Some changes to the routine are inevitable, though. For example, many ALEH residents need a lot of physical activity. Ordinarily these activities are supervised by one staff member for every three residents, while the ratio is increased to one on one in uncertain times so that each resident can be escorted swiftly to shelter in case of incoming missiles.

The residents’ cognitive impairments make it difficult to convey the reason for the disruptions in routine without causing undue panic.

“We explain the situation to our residents in all sorts of ways – one of our speech therapists devised a method to communicate most effectively -- and we work with them to understand why things have changed,” says Kleiner.

He gives credit to the director, Masada Skely, and ALEH Negev chairman, Maj. Gen. (Res.) Doron Almog, for their hands-on approach during tense days to make sure the residents remain as calm and reassured as possible.

“I can tell that the residents who are more high-functioning seem a little bit sad; they understand something is not right. But we don’t see a lot of anxiety here, and that’s because of the hard work of Masada and Doron,” says Kleiner. “Every day a psychologist meets with all the workers, and when the workers are calm the residents are calm as well.”

At all Israeli facilities for the elderly and disabled, protocols for safety under fire must be constantly reevaluated and updated to suit current needs. Despite the constant threat of missile bombardment from terrorist organizations in Gaza as well as from Israel’s northern neighbors, the emotional well-being of both clients and staff members is as high a priority as physical safety.