

## Sderot - General Background

Sderot was established as a development town in the northern Negev in accordance with Israeli government's policy in the 1950s and its vision of settling the Negev with millions of inhabitants. The location of Sderot, on the border with Gaza, was chosen so that the town could serve as a buffer between the Gaza Strip and central Israel.

Since its establishment in 1951, Sderot continues to serve as an example of a city that embodies the melting pot of Israeli society, a combination of Israelis with new and veteran immigrants from all over the world: a diverse population of secular, religious and traditional Jews who constitute a true mosaic of Israeli society.

Since Operation Protective Edge in 2014 when we were forced to launch a defensive operation against the enemy in nearby Gaza, the city has enjoyed an unprecedented calm and a tremendous momentum of development has begun. Sderot is home to 28,000 residents and we expect this number to reach 50,000 within the next few years. New neighborhoods with thousands of new housing units, schools, kindergartens and public institutions are being built: we are building new parks and public playgrounds, while others have been renewed and the urban infrastructure is being expanded.

**Alon Davidi** has been mayor of Sderot since 2013. He and his wife Nurit arrived in Sderot about 22 years ago as a young couple, part of a nucleus of teachers and educators who came to strengthen and reinforce the city and its inhabitants. On his arrival, Alon was the director of the hesder yeshiva situated in the city, and later began his public activity as assistant to the then Israeli Minister of Housing Effi Eitam, and in a variety of other positions in the public service. In 2006, with the severe deterioration in the security situation in the area surrounding the Gaza Strip, Alon established the Sderot Security Council, an organization whose goal is public action to strengthen the residents of Sderot and the Gaza Envelope and lobbying the government to find appropriate security solutions.

Since his election to office, Alon has been active in promoting the city of Sderot in the fields of welfare, education, resilience and infrastructure. Despite the complex security reality, five new neighborhoods are presently being built in Sderot and the plan is to double the number of residents within 5-7 years. Tourism infrastructures are also being built, with the aim of bringing in many visitors from Israel and throughout the world.



## **Sderot Resilience Center - Background:**

The number of inhabitants of Sderot is undergoing accelerated demographic growth. For many years, the city and the residents of the region have borne the brunt of enemy fire from the Gaza strip and is in the first circle of casualties in the Gaza Envelope. The ongoing state of emergency has resulted in children, adolescents and adults being affected and suffering from traumas that cause difficulties in everyday functioning. The symptoms may be relatively mild but in many cases they are complex and ongoing: anxiety and depression, insomnia, fear of noise, fear of being alone and clinging to parents, bedwetting, nightmares and impairment of parental abilities. To date, 80 percent of Sderot children suffer from post-traumatic stress disorder.

The Resilience Center in Sderot was established in the wake of a government decision in 2008 to help the residents of Sderot and the Gaza Envelope in coping with the security situation and its implications. The Center is a tool whereby we can generate resilience and a "language" of strength for the individual and the community, build partnerships and thereby strengthen sense of identity and belonging, develop social solidarity and provide tools for coping with the security situation with which the State of Israel contends.

The Resilience Center works in three main areas:

1. Emotional therapy free of charge - individual, family and group treatments for those under stress due to the ongoing security situation; before a new crisis, during the event and after it.
2. Developing and strengthening community resilience - various programs for residents and municipal representatives aimed at revealing strength within the community, reinforcing their sense of belonging to the city, providing tools for dealing with stress situations, encouraging residents' involvement and participation in routine and emergency situations, and creating "islands of resilience" throughout the city (in neighborhoods, synagogues, ethnic communities etc.).
3. Preparing for future emergencies – by promoting a process of emergency preparedness at all levels (functionaries, residents, volunteers), professional training in psychosocial issues and developing tools for coping with the changing challenges in the reality of life in this area.

In the event of an emergency, the Resilience Center is responsible for treating all the trauma victims citywide and acts as a kind of "emergency room", absorbing the victims and treating them on the spot without evacuating them to hospital; the staff provides an intervention team, arriving at the area where the rockets hit, performs home visits, mans a hotline 24/7, provides emotional support for the functionaries and municipal workers, gives parental guidance on issues related to anxiety in children and so forth.

## **Present Situation:**

The Resilience Center presently treats more than 1,000 children, adolescents and adults every year in individual therapy treatments and reaches thousands of residents through activities aimed at strengthening community resilience. The center provides 40,000 hours of treatment provided by a professional team of over 20 therapists, including psychiatrists, psychologists, social workers and emotional therapists.

The center operates in a space that is unsuitable for its wide range of activities and, more important, *it is not protected against rocket fire* and cannot provide the most basic need for a "safe space" for patients and trauma victims in times of emergency.

The State Comptroller's report after Operation Protective Edge, which examined the treatment of children and young people during the fighting, praised the activity of the Sderot resilience center and its being an anchor for the residents, but warned about the problem of treatment in an unprotected building.

Operation Protective Edge provided almost three and a half years of relative quiet, but with the start of the demonstrations on the fence between Gaza and Israel in March of 2018, the security situation deteriorated, and over the past year and a half there have been 11 rounds of intensive fighting, which also include incendiary balloons and kites and, of course, hundreds of missiles falling on Sderot and the Gaza Envelope. It would seem that another major military operation in Gaza is only a matter of time.

As a result of the multitude of terrifying incidents, the tension among the residents rises, as do their stress levels, symptoms of trauma intensify and cause sleep difficulties, bedwetting, clinging to parents, fears, nighttime nightmares, psychosomatic symptoms (stomachaches, headaches, rashes), and refusal to leave the shelter/home, etc. Consequently, the amount of approaches to the Resilience Center increases significantly.

Today the Resilience Center operates 11 treatment rooms which are fully booked from 8:00 a.m. until 9.00 p.m. every day. There is a real and urgent need to promote the construction of a larger and more spacious protected structure, so that we can continue to provide an immediate, professional solution for the residents of Sderot. We have received hundreds of requests for resilience therapy for children who are in need of treatments but are unable to provide a response due to lack of space and treatment rooms.

About a year ago, the municipality decided to allocate an appropriate protected area for the construction of a complex that will strengthen resilience and improve Sderot's population ability to cope with the security situation. The architectural plans and design for the center have been drawn up, and we are presently we are working on the final details and on raising funds for construction.

There will be four treatment centers in the complex: a center for individual therapy; a center for family therapy; a conference building dealing with research and study in the field of resilience. This building will serve as a magnet for professionals in Israel and abroad who will come to learn from the Sderot's experience in preparing, coping and providing solutions for a population under constant threat; the fourth center will be an animal-assisted therapy center which is an important part of the municipality's therapy program for children and youth. It is important to note that the existing center is presently budgeted by the Israeli government with the support of the Israel Trauma Coalition. Maintenance is provided by the local municipality. This support will continue while the new center is being built.

## **Sderot Resilience Complex**

After much deliberation, it was decided to establish a complex for the treatment of PTSD which will include the following main buildings:

**Building 1:** Resilience Building for individual and community therapy. A two-story building that will include approximately 15 treatment rooms, most of which are designed to for individual, one-on-one treatments. There will be some larger rooms for group therapies and workshops. A large proportion of resilience therapy patients are children. In the new, spacious center, we will be able to increase the number of patients in therapy by fifty percent. The present situation does not permit allocation of a satisfactory number of treatment hours for each child, and we have an waiting list that gets longer daily. The situation does not benefit all the children in the area needing therapy.

There is also a growing need for special needs populations - children with autism (ASD), developmental delays (PDD), significant ADHD, with emotional problems, anxiety, and so forth. Presently there is not sufficient space, nor sufficient treatments hours to provide them with an appropriate response, and the construction of the new center will certainly solve this problem.



**Building 2:** a building that will include family therapy rooms. The need for family guidance increases with the understanding that parents are the most significant factor in a child's life, experiencing the world through them; his parents are those who are supposed to provide him with a sense of security and ability. The ongoing security situation and the challenges it brings with it – the persistent anxiety, the symptoms of trauma and their impact on family members, the stress and the uncertainty – make it extremely difficult to function and lead the family in routine and emergency situations.

It is important to assist the families in providing support, professional guidance and direction on how to provide an appropriate response to children. The parents will acquire tools to help boost their self-confidence and cope better during crises.

This section of the Resilience Center will focus on family therapy and correct emotional and guidance for parents in the family environment. There will be a special emphasis on families with children with special needs and learning difficulties, since the security situation naturally exacerbates their already-existing difficulties.

The parents will be guided by professional teams of psychologists, emotional therapists and social workers who will provide them with tools to help them and their children cope with PTSD episodes.



### **Building 3: New Center for PTSD Research and Education.**

Sderot is considered the most protected city in the western world. Every home has a protected room, and next to every bus stop, park and central junction there are protected shelters for those who may be caught outside during a missile attack. The city has been dealing with terrorism for over 18 years, and over time we have become experts in dealing with different kinds of trauma. In recent years we have been approached by emergency treatment teams from local authorities and from abroad, requesting that we instruct them how to prepare an urban population to cope best with continuous trauma and stress situations.

The new Center for PTSD Research and Education will host workshops and conferences for emergency staff from Israel and abroad who will study about trauma, with an emphasis on the civilian population in traumatic situations and PTSD. We would like to establish a state-of-art center that will include a central conference hall,

workshop rooms and an innovative multimedia hall that simulates stress and stress. In addition, a number of rooms will be allocated for the research and development of trauma studies by professional research teams. These will include psychologists, psychiatrists, and emotional therapists who deal with trauma , and will also collaborate with academic institutions in Israel and around the world.



#### **4. Animal-assisted Therapy Center**

The present animal-assisted therapy center was established three years ago in a one-room building within the Student Village complex in Sderot. The main need was to diversify and offer additional types of treatment for PTSD. Mayor Alon Davidi initiated and led the establishment of the center after his own personal difficulties with his young daughters suffering from anxiety; Mayor Davidi enlisted the Israeli Trauma Coalition as a central partner for professional care and as main financier of the treatments within the center.

Animal-assisted therapy is an important tool in helping to improve a patient's social, emotional, or cognitive functioning, helping to express and relieve feelings, strengthen self-image and self-confidence, summon coping resources, and develop belief in themselves. The ability to build relationships and trust is renewed through contact with the animal; in this way, the traumatized individual is able to project his problems, contribute to others – in this case, to the animal –, take responsibility for his own life and deal with what is happening around him. The therapy enables him to leave his own bubble of loneliness and helplessness so common in trauma, and consequently to regain faith in himself and society.

At present, the small center is able to give 230 hours of professional treatment each month while the need is double the number of hours.

Dozens of children from Sderot and the Sha'ar Hanegev area are waiting for therapy, and we are unable to provide them with any response due to lack of space and additional treatment rooms. In addition, children with special needs who need significantly more hours cannot receive a satisfactory response, mainly due to lack of space. Due to the high demand for this type of treatment, the Municipality of Sderot decided last year to allocate a large area of about 3 dunams near the current location, to establish a permanent animal-assisted therapy center. The new center will include treatment rooms, animal cages and open spaces that will be therapy areas. The first stage (1.3 dunams) is presently being built in the new treatment complex and we are close to

completion. Fortunately, most of the resources required to complete this stage have been found, and immediately after its completion we will proceed to second stage

**Most of the money for the second stage has not yet been raised.**



### **Emunah Davidi and Mocca – a Story**

Emunah is the young daughter of Sderot Mayor Alon Davidi and his wife Nurit. Emunah, like many of Sderot's children suffers, from tension and anxieties caused by the ongoing security situation, consequently affecting her daily functioning. About two years ago, Emunah's parents decided to take her for a series of treatments at the animal-assisted therapy center. Emunah was extremely scared of animals, especially dogs! After a year of therapy and working with animals, Emunah has undergone a significant process of controlling her anxieties and strengthening her own resilience. She had 24 weekly treatments where she and her therapist spoke about fear and how to control and manage it.

At the end of the treatment period, at Emunah's request, the Davidi family decided to adopt a dog, Mocca.

Since Mocca has been in the Davidi home, Emunah is responsible not only for herself: she has a dog that she needs to take care of. Every time there is a series of alarms and missile attacks, it is Emunah who takes care of Mocca, takes him to the safe room, and reassures him. This process of giving the patient the responsibility of taking care of someone else makes it possible for him or her to control his own anxieties and tension, and deal with himself emotionally.



**Small Successes** - new chinchillas in the petting zoo. The children area able to recognize the fears and character of each chinchilla. The girl in the picture has difficulty in expressing herself. She watches the chinchillas and their behavior, and identifies the one who is most like her in character. She learns about them, does nonverbal work and is exposed to fear – not her own but that of the chinchilla. She tries to give them confidence and touch them. Some time ago, a missile landed in the city, and her parents reported that their daughter was in control and responded well.