

Originally posted on Mako, Israel, 3.19.2020

“Those diagnosed with Corona do not report their visits to the Tel Aviv Central Station.”

Organizations dedicated to support women in prostitution, and the homeless community, are facing a harsh reality on any given day, and an impossible one during the Coronavirus outbreak. They're trying to be creative. “If a young homeless woman comes to me now and tells me she needs to be quarantined, there's nothing I can do about it.”

Written by Liat Bar Stav.

The traffic is more sparse than usual around the old Central Station, and the streets of southern Tel Aviv. The usual setting of single men sitting in their cars, lurking, is replaced with silence that is broken every now and then by a lonely car. “There were a few big soccer games last week, so even without considering the Corona it was already a slow week. But now there are even less clients,” one of the women who work at the station tells us. “But really, the main concern of the girls around here is that clients won't come. None of us will stop working out of fear of getting infected.”

The homeless community isn't entirely sure what to make of this global outbreak. On the one hand, it is one of the most vulnerable communities when it comes to infections and diseases, and its members lack access to proper medical services. Even the medical services that are accessible to these communities, such as the Levinski clinic and the mobile clinic in Haifa, switched to some sort of emergency operating format. On the other hand, most of those infected so far are actually from average to high socio-economic background. Mostly those who came back from abroad, or came in touch with those who did.

“Up until two weeks ago, they've heard about the Coronavirus but it didn't bother them much. Who was going to infect them? Someone who came back from Naples? But now the information has sunk in, and they're trying to be more careful, the addicts, too,” a source in one of the organizations that are covering the area tells us. “No hugging, no handshaking, sometimes they'll punch instead, and they stay at a distance from the volunteers and professionals, who in turn work with gloves, masks, and hand sanitizers they received from the organizations. It is obvious to us that once the virus finds its way into this community, it'll be due to a man who doesn't care about the health of the women, just his own pleasure, and from there it'll spread all throughout the addicts and homeless community. The women don't make inquiries with the clients who come. Corona isn't their problem, those 300-400NIS they need right here and right now is. But once it finds its way into this community, it'll spread like fire.”

Chaos, confusion, and uncertainty

The subject of isolation and prevention of the virus spread is currently one of the most confusing matters among the support organizations. These organizations are seen as essential and they remain fully operational even now, and provide services to the extreme-risk demographics that rely on them. It is almost impossible to isolate those who need to be quarantined, yet the fear of spreading the virus, or the need to quarantine a whole shelter, forces the organizations to find creative solutions.

We spoke to someone who's involved in the process. "In the last two weeks, there haven't been any new intakes in all the adult addicts therapy centers. Kiryat Shlomo Center has made this arrangement - once only 8 patients remain at the center, they'll take in 2 more each time. These 2 will have to spend a week in isolation, then, they'll join the current 8, for a total of 10 people at a time. There's something similar in place at the Ra'anana Center. They have an isolation room that can contain 3-4 men. But that's it. This system also depends on vacancy. Meaning, in order to have a new arrival, someone else has to leave first."

"The places that are deemed 'essential,' the shelters, The Heart 24/7, sleeping spaces, are working as usual, but there is a bit of chaos, confusion, and uncertainty," says Reut Guy, head of the Extreme-Risk and Female Teenagers field at ELEM, an organizations that assists at-risk youth. "The major problem is that we have no way of putting someone in quarantine. Let's say a young homeless woman arrives here and tells me she needs to be quarantined for the next 14 days, there's nothing I can do about it. Our instructions are - let those who can quarantine do so. But in reality, we have to find the best solutions, because our existing programs can't offer any and I don't want to just turn someone away, and back to the street."

"Where are they going to be quarantined? The homeless are excluded from participating in the debate"

The main concern for the support organization is the fact that once the Coronavirus arrives, or even just the need to isolate someone who might be a carrier, practically speaking, there's nothing that can be done for that person. "Whenever there's a national emergency, they're excluded from the debate," Guy says. "When there are wars for example and everyone is talking about missiles and finding cover. Where are they going to find cover exactly? Where are they going to quarantine? As of now I have one girl who needs isolation, so I'm arranging emergency sleeping solution for her. That means I'm renting a room at a hostel for her, at 300NIS a day, out of ELEM's budget. But soon I might have 20 teenagers in a similar situation, and what do I do then? We can be that shelter for them, but only in a limited fashion. And what if the staff ends up needing isolation? I won't have anyone to operate these places. We need the manpower."

Another concern is tracking the meetings that teenagers who deal with prostitution have with clients who might be carrying the virus, or are even confirmed cases. "Clients do not report their visits to the Tel Aviv Central Station, or their meetings with teenagers, during the epidemiologist investigations. But we know that it's business as usual, especially on the apps," Guy tells us. "I have never told these teens 'don't meet with clients.' Now, for the first time ever, because of the Coronavirus, we told them it might be best to avoid meeting clients. Not as a sanction, but in order to keep themselves safe. They don't know where these clients have been to, and they're not concerned with any of it, either. At the end of the day, the number one cause of death in the sex industry is violence inflicted by clients, and that's more dangerous than the Coronavirus."

"No Filipino mother will call a medical emergency line and say 'I'm here with my kids.'"

Looking at the foreign workers community, those who seek refugee status, and those who lack legal immigration status, one can also see chaos, fear and uncertainty. Aside from the fear of the moment when the virus hits the community, there are also tough questions surrounding the issue of contacting the authorities when a suspicion of an infection arises.

“There’s great panic throughout the community. A lot of rumors flying around and they’re not exposed to all of the information that exists in Hebrew. So a big chunk of the work we do is to make this information accessible in as many languages as possible, so that first and foremost, they know what’s going on and what needs to be done,” says Zoe Gotzeit who is the head of the Immigrants Department at the Doctors for Human Rights Organization, and the open clinic for those who lack legal status. “These demographics are extremely vulnerable on any given day, impoverished, lacking access to health services. Now take all of this, and add the Coronavirus emergency on top of it, and you have a life threatening situation.”

Here, as well, two of the reoccurring issues are the inability to provide isolation to those who require it, and population density that might help the virus spread further and wider. “These are people, whom even if they really wanted to be self-quarantined at home, they wouldn’t be able to,” Gotzeit explains. “The refugee status seekers usually live in crowded single rooms, one family with all the children. The workers from Thailand all live together in container in the Arava, the nurses live at home with the elderly and the employees. If this virus finds its way to the community, it’ll be very hard to contain.”

“It’s also important to remember that these people do not have a social safety net,” she adds. “If they go into isolation, they lose their income. They’re also afraid of going to the hospital because they won’t be able to pay for the hospitalization.”

Another fear that is unique to these communities is the fear of reaching out to the authorities. It was only a few months back that a few families have been deported from Israel, so many are afraid of what might happen to them if they chose to call the authorities and report a suspicion for a Corona case, and have to provide identifying details. “Can you imagine a Filipino mother who tells the authorities where she and her children are staying? It’s not going to happen. The fear is understandable. A phone call like that will lead to deportation.”