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ELEM Israel president, Nava Barak: “The reality of life during the Coronavirus crisis brings with it a new set of hardships and challenges.”

[TRANSCRIPT]

Yael DAN: Those of us who get to sit at home and use the internet are the lucky ones, because some don't have a home to sit in, or that home itself is a dangerous place. Hello Nava Barak, the President of ELEM, the organization for at-risk youth. Hi there Nava, hello.

NAVA BARAK: Hello.

Yael DAN: Let's talk about the youth who are your day-to-day concern, that youth who's been thrown out to the street. I can't even imagine youth being on the street nowadays because... because... there's no room for them on the streets nowadays. But what do you do about them? What does youth like that must face?

NAVA BARAK: I must say that if during normal times the youth we serve deals with many hardships, the reality of life during the Coronavirus crisis brings with it a new set of hardships and challenges. So at ELEM the show must go on. We had to limit operations at our afternoon centers, of course. We aren't granted the sort of direct access to the youth we usually have, we moved most of our activities on-line so that we can reach them. Our 24/7 homeless shelters are still open, but we're faced with... very extreme hardships for people who are at home. For most of us home is where we're safe, for them home is a threatening, suffocating place, where they often experience verbal, physical, and sexual violence. And many young female teenagers who are stuck at home, who still carry with them traumas of sexual abuse during their childhood, and now they're exposed to that environment again. They're at home with the same father who hurt them, they run away, and they reach out to us from all sorts of hideouts so that we can help them and stay in touch.

Yael DAN: Let's loop in Irit Aloni, head of the Youth Centers Field at ELEM.

IRIT ALONI: Good afternoon.

Yael Dan: Hey Irit. Can you tell me a little bit about what you see on the ground these days.

Irit Aloni: Yes, I'd like to reiterate Nava's words and to share some very rough stories from the field.

Yael Dan: Could you give us a few examples?

Irit Aloni: It can be self-inflicted injuries. Just this week there was a girl who sold nude photos of herself on-line. A few boys, teenagers that are now... a group that's just not at home. They're getting out of the threatening home, during these crazy times they roam the streets and in order to dilute the pain they drink a lot of alcohol, use mind-altering substances. They chase the police, they get electrical bikes and tease the officers, looking to be chased by the police. The police reaches out to us and asks for our help.

Yael Dan: Why?

Irit Aloni: As a form of escape, of...

Yael Dan: Why are they looking to provoke the police? For attention?

Irit Aloni: They're looking for an escape, yes, exactly. Often times from that place of looking to belong, of seeking attention, of feeling alone, they look for it in far from ideal ways. Sure, I'm an adolescent, I'm pushing boundaries, it's... in the core of who I am right now. So this is another step, of pushing boundaries even further because there's no one to set boundaries at this time. Not at school, not at home, not even... in the non-formal establishments where boundaries look different, but they still exist. So I, as a teen, roam the streets with other teens, and seek, and find ways to push more boundaries. It can be teens who came back from boarding schools, really young guys, who experience regression in their process because they go back to groups within those harmful neighborhoods. We see a wide range of dangerous behaviors that are coming to the surface. The youth...

Yael Dan: But what can you do for them at this time, Irit? How can you help them?

Irit Aloni: We all... Nava do you want to talk about this?

Nava Barak: Yeah, I think we adjusted our way of therapy to fit the current situation, so first and foremost, we operate on-line, where people spend most of the day. We reach out to them, offer

support, for some of them this is the only relationship with a “good” adult. In our centers for homeless youth, youth who fell to prostitution, we’ve expanded our operations even though financial support for these centers has been cut. We still have our staff in place to be there for the youth.

Yael Dan: Yeah.

Nava Barak: Otherwise we’ll lose them, and we don’t want to desert them, we don’t want to give up on a single one of them, and I really must address Welfare and ask that rather than cutting our support, provide us with even more support, especially for youth at extreme risk. It’s incredibly important to us.

Yael Dan: Yes, yes. Nava Barak and Irit Aloni from ELEM, thank you both, thank you very much.

Irit Aloni: Thank you.

Nava Barak: Thank you and a Happy Passover.