

The Fund for Victims of Terror: Our Collective Success Story

In 2002 the Second Intifada was raging in Israel. Suicide bombers were exacting a tremendous toll in Israeli lives. Concerned Jews in North America watched the devastation and yearned to do something meaningful, something with direct impact to help the beleaguered people of Israel. UJC/Federation and Keren Hayesod leaders came together and through the Jewish Agency they founded the Fund for Victims of Terror. Today, the

“After a rocket fell a few feet from me, it was the Jewish Agency’s Fund for Victims of Terror that got me back on my feet again.”

-- Liz Edri, 24, Sderot

Fund stands at the forefront of driving change in the policy, strategy and decision-making for the short, medium and long-term needs of terror victims.

From 2002 – 2005 this Fund helped 3,500 people to the tune of \$20 million. In 2005, terror, thankfully, was declining and with a collective sigh of relief, the Fund was closed. However, the reprieve was short-lived.

In the summer of 2006 the Second Lebanon War erupted, and suddenly almost one-fourth of Israel’s civilian population in the North was on the front line. Federations and Keren Hayesod stepped into action. In one of the most powerful shows of collective support ever seen in the UJC/Federation System, the Israel Emergency Campaign (IEC) was launched, and a total of \$350 million dollars was pledged in the course of 30 days. Within this campaign, The Fund for the Victims of Terror was reactivated.

The Fund, chaired by the honorable Judge Ezra Kama, brought together and worked with representatives from all of the relevant government bodies that deal with caring for victims of terror: the National Insurance Institute, the Ministry of Defense and the Ministry of Absorption. This ensured the Fund’s vital goal to provide direct financial assistance to victims of terror to complement the monetary relief from government agencies and offices. The advisory committee included representatives from UJC, federations of North America, Keren Hayesod, Jewish Agency and government ministries.

The support of the Fund was designed to improve the quality of life for the victims and their families, to fulfill crucial needs and ease their recovery and rehabilitation. Assistance ran the gamut from medical equipment, rental assistance, basic furniture or home equipment to informal education and enrichment, tuition assistance, welfare needs and any other way the fund deemed worthy of helping victims return to normal life.

The Fund gained incredible momentum and snowballed beyond its original mandate. With its dedicated and professional staff, its flexible, tailored criteria and efficient decision-making process, it became a leader in identifying and responding to needs in the field.

“The Fund’s assistance came at just the right time for me. It’s so heartening that people care, that it matters to them what happened to me.”

-- Tomer Weinberg, critically wounded soldier, Second Lebanon War

Thus, when soldiers were injured in the Second Lebanon War, the Fund provided assistance. When families were mourning their sons who fell in the War, the Fund stepped in to help. When children were orphaned, the Fund reached out. And when the war ended, and terror erupted in the South, where an unrelenting barrage of rockets were launched from Gaza and terrorized an entire region, the Fund understood that in addition to longer-term recovery needs, the citizens needed immediate emergency assistance.

Without delay the SOS Fund was established, providing funds within an unprecedented 48 hours to assist vulnerable families who suffered direct damage from Kassam rocket fire. Each family that was eligible for help from the fund received up to \$1,000 for purchases of food, medical supplies, essential equipment that was destroyed by the rocket, and any other immediate need not met by other bodies who help victims. This support continued during and after the Gaza War.

Today, the Fund for Victims of Terror is leading unprecedented change in responding to the multi-layered needs of terror victims. This was seen in its recent groundbreaking study on Mapping the Needs of Victims of Terror Attacks in Israel, conducted in cooperation with the New School of Psychology of the Interdisciplinary Center (IDC), Herzliya, led by Mario Mikulincer, a global leader in social psychology research. The 262- page, in depth study was presented and extremely well received at the First International Conference on the Psycho-Social Consequences of Terror Incidents, which brought together foremost experts from Israel and around the world, and focused on the repercussions of terror acts on society in general and on the victims in particular.

The comprehensive study, which combined qualitative and quantitative research methods among 254 recipients of the Fund (179 terror victims and 75 bereaved families) as well as among rehabilitation workers, mapped the needs of victims and bereaved families at different stages following a terror attack. This is vitally important for both the institutions and organization that provide for victims’ needs, for bringing this topic to the national public and government agenda and assisting in forging new policy decisions.

Key findings of the study include:

- More than half of the victims and more than a quarter of the bereaved families were in need of basic survival items such as food and medicine.
- Distinct financial needs develop at different periods following the terror event
- The key immediate and short term needs for victims were: finding housing solutions, nursing care and help in finding medical equipment
- For bereaved families, the short range needs were for financial aid to organize mourning rituals
- In the long-range (months and years after the incident) 50.6% of the victims and 36% of the bereaved families were unemployed and in severe debt
- Financial assistance needs for the long-term included dental treatment, education and vocational training, rent and buying furniture
- In addition to financial needs, there are a whole range of psychological, social and communal needs for acceptance, empathy, support and recognition that are important to address
- The need for emotional support rises as time passes from the tragic incident

The study also brought to the fore the necessity to compile a comprehensive booklet to summarize all of the existing organizations that assist terror victims. The Fund and the New School of Psychology mapped the organizations, conducted in-depth interviews and produced a user-friendly booklet that has proven invaluable to terror victims and bereaved families.

Rivka Cohen's wood house in Netivot was demolished by a missile. All of her household items were destroyed. When she received the check from the SOS Fund she simply said, "Thank you. I have no money. Now, I can buy clothes and a toothbrush."

The vast majority of Fund recipients gave top scores to the Fund in a number of areas and 86.2% of the families and 81.9% of the victims said that it met main needs that were not met by the state. Most of the recipients also chose the highest score to convey their desire to personally thank the Fund's generous supporters.

The Fund for the Victims of Terror has brought systematic change and created a new paradigm for caring for the broad needs of victims of terror and bereaved families. Continually fueled and energized by the incredible support of the Federations of North America and Keren Hayesod, the Fund reflects the significance of the collective and its life-altering impact. As the Israeli people continue to fight for Israel's right to exist, they know that the Jewish people are behind them. The Fund is a compelling testament to this reality.