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HOW ISRAEL'S LEADING HUMANITARIAN VOLUNTEER-STAFFED MEDICAL EQUIPMENT AND ALLIED SERVICES NGO IS PREPARING FOR A WAR WITH HEZBOLLAH

BY ELYA COWLAND

Times of emergency often act as a test for organizations—some manage to grow and adapt, while others struggle. The war with Hamas has brought infrastructure changes in the south, loss of workforce manpower, and financial strain, and many NGOs were caught unprepared by the sudden shift in the landscape brought about by the conflict. Yad Sarah is one organization that has proven its ability to adapt, time and time again, from its operations in the current war with Hamas to providing critical support during COVID.

Yad Sarah, Israel's leading volunteer-staffed organization, has provided a wide range of health and home care services for nearly 50 years across all demographics of Israeli society. Building on its decades of experience in routine times and emergencies, the NGO quickly mobilized following the October 7 attack. The organization utilized its fleet of wheelchair-accessible vans to evacuate wheelchair-bound individuals from danger zones, set up temporary medical lending facilities in areas where evacuees were relocated, and hosted evacuees in its facilities.

Israel faces an unprecedented number of people hospitalized and wounded from the war, with thousands expected to need long-term rehabilitation. To this end, Yad Sarah has played a pivotal role in alleviating stress on Israel's state-run healthcare system and filling the need for out-patient and at-home rehabilitation equipment and services. Among its emergency aid provisions, the NGO established a hotline in collaboration with the IDF to assist injured soldiers and airlifted special rehabilitation equipment into the country. All while continuing to provide its regular services.

Moshe Cohen, CEO of Yad Sarah, attributes the organization's success during the war to its logistical abilities during ordinary times. "The organization's well-oiled day-to-day operations enable us to be agile and innovative during emergencies so we can quickly address what's needed," he said. "With our network of 7,000 volunteers, Yad Sarah is well positioned to continue delivering compassionate care so life can go on as comfortably as possible, even in the most challenging circumstances."

As the threat of a full-scale war with Hezbollah grows, Yad Sarah is preparing to face even bigger challenges. One of the main threats posed by a war with Hezbollah is a strike on Israel's power grid that would lead to widespread electrical failure. Power outages can be life-threatening for individuals who rely on electricity-powered medical devices like oxygen machines.

Yad Sarah has taken several steps to ensure electrical failure won't cut out people's critical oxygen supplies. First, the organization purchased over 1,000 generators and battery-powered oxygen machines to distribute to individuals dependent on electricity living in vulnerable areas. Then, due to shipping challenges caused by Houthi attacks in the Red Sea, Yad Sarah chartered a plane to airlift this equipment to Israel. It also introduced a service that pairs individuals relying on oxygen with neighbors who own home generators, ensuring they know where to go in case of electrical failure. Yad Sarah also established a new on-site oxygen refilling and distribution center to minimize reliance on third-party services that might be unavailable during a blackout.

Israel's northern region, which borders Lebanon, is expected to be the most impacted by an escalation in the conflict

with Hezbollah. As a result, Yad Sarah has set up two temporary medical lending facilities in the region. It has also equipped its 25+ permanent regional branches with surplus inventory to provide medical equipment, medication, and other essentials. Additionally, volunteers from the organization's accessible transport fleet are ready to evacuate wheelchair users from the north if necessary.

Should there be a ground incursion, an increase in military injuries is unfortunately expected. Building upon its infrastructure expanded at the start of the Gaza war, Yad Sarah is prepared to assist additional injured soldiers with home hospitalization and rehabilitation support through the hotline it set up at the beginning of the war. Yad Sarah also ordered specialized rehabilitation equipment for common war-related injuries, such as Continuous Passive Motion (CPM) machines for knee injuries. The organization is also ready to assist injured civilians, with special units set up in nearly every hospital in the country.

During the first three months of the Gaza war, Yad Sarah lent out more equipment than it does in an average year. Despite the war and the challenges it has brought, the organization continues to operate most of its over 120 branches, with some located close to combat zones operating from bomb shelters to ensure they can continue to serve their communities.

Yad Sarah offers many services beyond equipment lending, including no-cost medicine distribution, support groups for caregivers, and a respite center for women recovering after stillbirth. Maintaining these services throughout the war has remained a priority for the organization. ■