

Originally aired on Today's Agenda, Keren Neubach's Radio show on Kan B radio station, 4.7.2020

Tzlil Avraham's Kan Digital report on ELEM and the Coronavirus crisis.

[TRANSCRIPT]

KEREN NEUBACH: Hello there, Tzlil Avraham.

TZLIL AVRAHAM: Hey Keren.

KEREN NEUBACH: Okay, Kan Digital. Let's talk about at-risk youth.

TZLIL AVRAHAM: Let's.

KEREN NEUBACH: Those who... on the day to day their norm is to exist between the streets and different shelters that offer them a temporary escape from time to time, sometimes a permanent solution.

Where are they spending these last few weeks?

TZLIL AVRAHAM: Yes, so ELEM, the organization for at-risk youth, is telling us that since the movement restriction were put in place, these youth lost a lot of the programs that allowed for growth, schools shut down, many boarding schools shut down and sent everyone home. And the truth is that many of these kids do have a home, but it's not a home where they can be for an extended amount of time because often times they are being hurt at home, be it violence, sexual abuse. So they attend these programs for at-risk youth that sometimes manage to get a hold of them, find them on the streets, at parks, and now many of these programs just don't operate. Or operate at a very limited capacity. As a reminder, the Ministry of Welfare itself is only working at 30% capacity at the moment. And they have decided, through some sort of negotiation with The Ministry of Finance and the Ministry of Health, which programs will remain open and work under Welfare, and which would close. So, for example, ELEM's Outreach Vans who go out on the streets and look for these youth, who look and help kids who can't stay home, help them, assist them, well, these vans have been shut down. A program for LGBTQ youth, a program for formerly religious youth or youth who questions, for them, many times being at home creates great distress, they're also often in big financial distress, well, these programs operate remotely and with limitations, which means the counselors communicate with them through Zoom or

on the phone. But we'll shortly have Roy from ELEM with us and he'll explain, that this doesn't fit kids who are at certain homes and don't have privacy. So practically speaking, many of these youths vanish. Up until now they would roam the streets, now they can't do that, and it's not clear where they are. Maybe they're at places where they use drugs, or at homes where they experience violence.

KEREN NEUBACH: Yeah. Let's talk to Roy Homri, Head of the Street Work Field at ELEM. Hello Roy.

ROY HOMRI: Hello.

KEREN NEUBACH: Give us the status of things. What are you... do you even manage to see the youth, and if so, where do you meet them, and what state do you find them in?

ROY HOMRI: I'll say that yes, we do manage to see the youth, on both ends, meaning that our staff and volunteers work very hard to look for and find the youth, but the youth themselves also, from the midst of their distress, call us, to come, they signal to us, they say they need the help. And we, basically thanks to this mutual outreach, we manage to see them. The help itself is sometimes limited. But we're doing everything we can in order to keep locating these youth.

KEREN NEUBACH: Where are they at?

ROY HOMRI: So as Tzlil mentioned earlier, some of them are... we basically see two types of reactions. Internal escape, and external escape. Internal escape is basically the kids who shut down even more, within their homes, which may be because they're dealing with severe emotional distress and increase in their anxiety and depression. And we see increase of self-harming for some kids who are at home. Cutting, drinking, some even take mind-altering substances at home, kids who experience violence at home and shut down within themselves, again at home. The other type of kids is the ones who can't stay at home and run away. So they escape to vacant apartments they're familiar with. They escape into educational establishments that are now deserted.

KEREN NEUBACH: Oh, that are currently deserted, right.

ROY HOMRI: Yeah... kindergartens. I heard from a professional partner who works at a boarding school that some of the youth come knocking at the doors of the now-closed boarding schools and ask to be taken back in.

KEREN NEUBACH: But the boarding schools are shut down I'm assuming, so...

ROY HOMRI: Yeah but in some cases there's still staff there, the maintenance crew, and...

KEREN NEUBACH: And they let them in?

ROY HOMRI: Sometimes they do, but I must say that...

KEREN NEUBACH: But I'm assuming it's on a voluntary basis? Sort of "we can't turn you away."

ROY HOMRI: Exactly.

TZLIL AVRAHAM: Roy, I'm assuming the cancellations, and in some cases the restrictions, on public transportation are also effecting the situation, right?

ROY HOMRI: That's very true. The youth mostly depend on public transportation to travel, and this caused them to be confined at a certain place, most likely the place where they were when the restrictions were put in place. And from the moment there was an escalation with all restrictions and guidelines, their ability to move freely became greatly limited. So they're confined to the towns and cities, and, you spoke earlier with, whomever is in charge... in the Israeli police...

KEREN NEUBACH: In charge of traffic and movement, yes.

ROY HOMRI: And I want to tell you a heartwarming story. Two weeks ago...

KEREN NEUBACH: I did want to talk to you about your relationship with the police during this time.

ROY HOMRI: So, yeah, so I want to start with something very positive. Two weeks ago, one of our youths from a city near Jerusalem, he ran away. Is mom his violent towards him, his brother, and his sister, and it has only gotten worse. We see a lot of video clips of violence in the public space, and we see a lot of hitting and violence, and it's an expression of pressure and distress, and the same things happen at homes, and at his home his mom gets these very violent episodes, which she directs at the children. He ran away and they met him in Herzeliya. Very far from home. And at the end of the day, the people who helped him get to a safe space were the police officers in Herzeliya. It makes me emotional. They met him, they hugged him, gave him a ride in the police car, supported him the whole way, and I must say,

for the most part, the police is really trying... to help us during these times. We don't see a rise in reports of police violence against youth at this time, or increased, aggressive enforcement against youth, and the officers are aware, if they meet a youth on the street they ask if he has somewhere safe to go. Which is an extremely important question when it comes to the youth we work with, not a usual one, not by default.

KEREN NEUBACH: Right. That's impressive. So what is needed? What do you think is the solution? Meaning, what would you want to see happening, so these kids, so their situation won't be much, much worse in a month or two?

ROY HOMRI: I think that the decisions made by the Ministry of Welfare, Finances and Health, were basically to analyze programs based on how things were before the Coronavirus crisis, and to understand who can work now based on many factors that may have seemed relevant when the decisions were made, but aren't relevant with the current reality, because the current reality has changed, it's not what it was prior to the crisis, the responsibility for these youth now, as Tzlil mentioned, are the authorities, the distress at home has increased.

TZLIL AVRAHAM: There are some youth that weren't in programs before, weren't recognized as at-risk youth before the crisis, but now that they're constantly at home and their parents are encountering financial difficulties and stress, they became youth at-risk, they encountered violence and the authorities aren't even aware that they need help.

ROY HOMRI: Right, right. There's a spike in poverty. Kids who used to get a hot meal in their educational programs aren't getting these meals. And this entire crisis forces us to find new solutions, not just understanding what used to be, and what can keep going as it used to, but to understand that any sort of existing solution, anyone who's a professional normative adult, who has an ability to help and support, we have to ask them – we'll give you a 100%, you tell us how you can help. And not just assume that this person can work at 30% or 40% capacity. Because if you look at the LGBTQ community, and formerly religious or questioning youth, whom we meet on the street often, these are demographics often without a family support, they experience violence and bullying, they don't have the support of a community, to get the services they need...

TZLIL AVRAHAM: Are they back home now Roy?

ROY HOMRI: No.

TZLIL AVRAHAM: The LGBTQ youth, and the questioning youth who've been rejected at home.

ROY OMRI: No.

TZLIL AVRAHAM: Where do they go?

ROY HOMRI: They don't have homes to go back to. No place to go back to. So the state operates out-of-home sleeping arrangements. These services are operating right now. But the number of beds in each one of these places is limited.

KEREN NEUBACH: And these places are packed, according to the information you have?

ROY HOMRI: According to what I know, these places are full. They're full during normal times, so you can bet on them being full now, during an emergency. Moreover, the staff at these places has needs, too. Maybe a staff member came back, realizes he needs to be quarantined, so they're also facing difficulties with staffing.

KEREN NEUBACH: Right. And ELEM's work on the street? Was it stopped?

ROY HOMRI: Our work was stopped due to the assumption that there's no one on the street, that no one needs to be on the street. But that assumption, I'm sorry to say, is not in line with the actual reality. Youths are out on the street. And not only are they out there, the streets are now empty of "normative" adults. Those who are outside, aside from the authorities, are people whom we wouldn't want our youth to meet even when there's no crisis. So the youth is simply abandoned on the streets. We see them, and they send us photos of apartments they invaded, and what's happening in these apartments, they don't have the ability to maintain minimal hygiene which can lower their chance of exposure to this disease if need be, they don't always have a way of getting food,

TZLIL AVRAHAM: They also have nowhere to gather food,

ROY HOMRI: Correct. There are no restaurants, there's nothing. And since no one is there to point out this phenomenon, so it's as if everything is fine. But we're saying, look, this is happening,

KEREN NEUBACH: This is exactly why we're here, too. Roy, thank you very much.

ROY HOMRI: Thank you.