

Hagit Pe'er

Caring for Women and Children in the Negev

Hagit Pe'er is the chairperson of NA'AMAT in the Negev Region. She oversees 14 day care centers, two targeting at-risk youth, as well as a women's rights center that provides legal counseling and other services to more than 1,300 women and families each year.

Pe'er joined NA'AMAT in 2011. Previously, she was a product specialist with a telecommunications company with expertise in security services. In her current role, she applies her technical and managerial skills to the challenges of caring for and educating young children, and helping women overcome poverty, workplace and family issues.



“Although I’ve been in this job for only two and a half years, it feels more like ten,” Pe'er says. “I love what I do. It is a great privilege to help women and encourage them to make changes in their lives. When I was 18 and in the army, my job was to help women. Now, I’m doing it again. So, I’ve come full circle.”

The Negev encompasses 4,700 square miles of lightly populated, mostly desert land in southern Israel. Three-fourths of its 630,000 residents are Jews. The rest are primarily Bedouin Arabs. Poverty is a bigger problem here than in the rest of the country. The region also faces special security issues due to its proximity to Gaza. “It is a very hard place,” observes Pe'er. “Women here have a lot of problems, both working women and women who stay at home. NA'AMAT provides them with many critical services. We do a good job for

them.”

The Negev faced particular hardships during last year’s conflict with Gaza known as Operation Protective Edge. As with similar conflicts in 2008 and 2012, the area came under heavy rocket fire and experienced numerous casualties. Pe'er was forced to close 13 NA'AMAT day care centers out of concern for the safety of children.

The one day care center that remained open was located within Soroka Medical Center in Beersheba, the region’s only major hospital. NA'AMAT took on added responsibilities in providing services for the children of the hospital’s staff. “It was a very hard time,” Pe'er recalls. “The hospital was on the front line; they took care of all the injured, military and civilian.”

“We cared for babies as young as eight months old,” she adds. “That allowed the doctors and nurses to do their work without worrying about the safety of their families. They did great work.”

Pe'er is currently conducting meetings with representatives of the army and municipal leaders to be better prepared should conflict flare up again. Safe rooms are being added to day care centers to protect children from rocket attacks.

NA'AMAT's operations in the Negev are being expanded in other ways as well. A new kindergarten is under construction and workshops offering prenatal, parenting and relationship training are growing. New programs focused on Arab women are being developed. "Many Arab women in Israel face poverty and have special needs," Pe'er says. "We are conducting lots of meetings with them in order to better understand those needs. If we don't take care of their problems today, we will have problems in the future."

The success of such ventures depends on the support NA'AMAT receives from its sister organizations in the United States and elsewhere in the world. "We could not do it without them," Pe'er insists. "I thank them every day. It is important to us to know that people abroad believe in our work and believe in NA'AMAT."

Although Pe'er is deeply concerned about the potential for future conflict, she believes that the work NA'AMAT is doing in the Negev is contributing to a long-term resolution. "I love these children, I love these families and I love this area," she says. "And I want to continue doing all I can to keep the children happy and safe."

