

JDC officials describe Ukraine relief effort



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Despite months of turmoil, Ukraine's Jews have continued to receive lifesaving medicine, food, and other vital services through the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee.

"During the last five months we have never interrupted our services," said JDC Ukraine Government Affairs director Oksana Galkevich.

Galkevich and JDC colleague Dov Ben-Shimon appeared May 2 at a leadership briefing at the South River offices of Jewish Federation of Greater Middlesex County. At the meeting, it was announced that the federation had made an emergency \$11,700 donation to JDC, a federation partner, for its Ukrainian efforts.

Federation executive director Gerrie Bamira said the donation was made to "ensure the uninterrupted delivery of vital services to poor and isolated elderly Jews as well as at-risk children and their families. This ongoing partnership and relief effort is possible because of the generous donors in Jewish Middlesex."

Galkevich said JDC representatives have braved sniper fire, crossed dangerous checkpoints, and devoted countless extra hours to ensure the health and safety of Ukraine's 300,000-350,000 Jews, 17,000 of whom live in Crimea, the area taken over by Russia in March.

The Kharkov native, who came to the United States to update her organization's community partners, said that support has been stepped up at its *hesed* welfare and community centers in affected areas of the country. Security and food and medicine deliveries had been increased, additional counseling services provided, and a round-the-clock emergency phone chain had been set up to monitor clients. Additionally, situation rooms throughout the nation have been established to provide constant updates on the local situation even as contingency plans have been prepared in case of emergency.

JDC operates 32 *hesed* centers in Ukraine, including three in Crimea, and serves Jews in more than 1,000 locations.

"People are scared, and when they need someone to talk to they call or come to our *hesed* centers," said Galkevich. "We thought with all the disorder, people would not come to the centers, but we were wrong. People need people. Our social workers try to comfort them."



Oksana Galkevich said JDC's representatives have taken risks and devoted countless hours to safeguard the country's Jews.

Photo by Debra Rubin

Particularly vulnerable are the elderly who live on meager monthly government pensions and are suffering because of Ukraine's devalued currency and sharp spike in prices for goods and services. She said many are survivors of the Holocaust and the privations of the communist regime.

“People literally have to make a choice between heart medication and a carton of eggs,” said Galkevich. “The JDC has such deep infrastructure, we were able to help every single person” who approached the centers, said Galkevich.

The aid given to the Jewish community has produced a situation rife with irony. Ben-Shimon, JDC's director of strategic partnerships, said Jews tend to live longer than non-Jewish Ukrainians because of the food, medical, and homecare services made possible through the JDC and its partners in the North American federation system, but “they live longer, lonelier lives” because in many cases, their children have left the country.

And while there is “no institutional anti-Semitism on the state level or government level,” said Galkevich, widespread violence has left the community frightened.

“So far the Jews have not been targeted,” she said, but downtown Kiev “is in ruins” with cobblestones ripped from the streets for use as weapons. In Odessa, with 40,000 Jews — and where JDC serves 7,000 clients — a flare-up of violence between pro-Ukraine and pro-Russian factions has had a chilling effect on the population.

Galkevich said JDC staff members are committed to continue serving their clients. She told the story of Irina, a homecare worker in Kiev who stayed at the home of one of her clients, a disabled Holocaust survivor terrified of spending the night alone.

Realizing she had another elderly client nearby who depended on her for meals, Irina cooked enough for both women. Between bursts of sniper gunfire from rooftops, Irina ran back and forth from one apartment to the other.

In Sevastopol, a city with about 5,000 Jews on the Crimean peninsula, the *hesed* center remained the only “fully functioning” Jewish organization after the Russian invasion. Galkevich said its director gave every worker traveling to a client a signed letter explaining they were doing humanitarian work for the center.

In a testament to its reputation, when the letters were shown to Russian soldiers turning away vehicles at roadblocks, many would say, “Ah, *hesed* — you can go through.”

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