
SUMMARY

2021

MESILA

DEAR FRIENDS AND PARTNERS,

Apart from summarizing Mesila's activities in 2021, I would also like to reflect on the past eight years I have dedicated to the complex, challenging, and impactful role as the Director of Mesila.

Mesila is a unique municipal unit run by the Tel Aviv-Yafo Municipality. It was established by Mayor Ron Huldai 22 years ago and provides assistance and social services to asylum seekers and undocumented people.

For twenty-five years, I have worked with and for marginalized and underprivileged populations - HIV patients, those living with mental illnesses, at-risk youth, people with substance use disorders, and, in recent years, the most neglected group in Israeli society - asylum seekers and undocumented people. To this day, I am driven by a passion to create meaningful social change which affects individuals' access to their human rights and leads to policy change.

With a combined sense of sadness and excitement, I am now parting from the beloved Mesila team and the special asylum seekers community, and embarking on a new journey as Director of the Southern Division of the Social Services Administration at the Tel Aviv-Yafo Municipality. In my new position, I will continue supporting the asylum seekers community and provide general oversight to Mesila, in addition to improving the quality of life for other underserved population groups residing in South Tel Aviv.

Over the past eight years, Mesila has become a second home to me, as I fought for justice for the community, the plight of the asylum seekers and the struggles they continue to endure have become my own. I have been humbled by my work with the community, inspired by the courage and resilience the community continues to show despite continuous hardships. I connect deeply with their yearning to have a safe and stable place to raise a family and live a life of dignity.

I have not been alone in this journey - an extraordinarily, talented and dedicated staff has stood by my side every step of the way. Together, we created new and innovative ways to support our clients, never accepting "no" for an answer, and finding solutions even during the toughest of times and often with few resources.

Throughout the years at Mesila, we have both struggled and soared- there have been critical "wins" and policy advancements for the community, and other times where as much as we tried, our hands were tied in the face of unthinkable inequality, poverty and adversity. Despite these challenges, we have persevered over the years, tripling our staff and the number of clients we serve, and developing and adapting programs and services to meet the changing needs and obstacles. There is still much work to be done, and I am departing from Mesila with the utmost confidence that the team is in a strong and stable place to continue to advocate for the community.

2021 was characterized by the COVID-19 pandemic, and the unfounded humanitarian crisis it caused within the community. Mesila worked to extend psycho-social support to the community, whose health, mental and emotional resilience was compromised as a result. Our activities during this year were also defined by the severe economic crisis that emerged, with efforts to mitigate this gap by distributing direct financial assistance to thousands of community members who were unable to pay their rent or purchase groceries.

As such, in summarizing our activities in 2021, we chose to highlight Mesila's unique community programs which were developed with and for the community in order to meet the changing needs over this difficult year.

With my departure I would like to extend my deepest gratitude to the incredible Mesila team, to the strong and beautiful families from the community, and to our cherished partners - foundations, government agencies and private individuals - for your friendship, and unwavering support. You have been by my side all of these years and I thank you from the bottom of my heart. I hope that you will continue on this journey in the fight for human rights and social justice.

I will not say goodbye. Instead, I look forward to being engaged with the community from a different angle- witnessing Mesila's continued growth and capacity to eradicate inequality.

**Yours with admiration and love,
Miri Barbero-Elkayam
Director of Mesila**

MESILA: WITH AND FOR ASYLUM SEEKERS AND UNDOCUMENTED COMMUNITIES

Throughout the past year, Mesila has worked to develop and adapt various programs that seek to address the increased vulnerabilities experienced by asylum seekers and undocumented communities as a result of the COVID-19 crisis.

SOCIAL GROCERY STORE – A HOLISTIC SOLUTION TO FOOD INSECURITY IN THE COMMUNITY

"My name is Simrat and I'm a community activist. I see how people from my community are struggling to meet their basic needs. The social grocery store is a highly important initiative for the community. It ensures that the basic needs of the families who most require assistance are met. Thanks to the grocery store, parents are now able to feed their children. The grocery store is especially important for single mothers who even if they work, never have enough. Many single mothers have been struggling to provide their children with a meal every day. Now, the children in those families are no longer hungry."

The COVID-19 pandemic has had a critical impact on the financial and emotional resilience of community members. Among other things, there was a dramatic rise in food insecurity within the community.

Lockdowns and closure of the hospitality industry resulted in loss of livelihoods of thousands of families and a growing dependency on handouts of prepackaged boxes from a few organizations in order to meet basic nutritional needs. Families no longer had autonomy over their food choices, and became dependent on outside agencies to dictate their diets.

Self-efficacy is a key to strengthening community resilience and recovery of vulnerable populations during a crisis. As such, in order to provide a holistic solution to the acute hunger and financial strain, we worked to establish a choice model social grocery store that enables individuals and households in the community to access nutritious and culturally adapted foods, which the families get to choose themselves. The program also includes specialized nutrition education and capacity enhancement in order to address the unique needs of the community.

The Grocery Store customers are selected by clear eligibility criteria. Customers are able to shop for their own items and the quantities determined by the size of the household. This choice model provides a dignified approach to a massive challenge, enabling clients to have autonomy over their food choices and take back their right to access and prepare nutritious food for their children.

The grocery store, which began operating in the middle of July, serves 700 of the most vulnerable families in the community (approximately 2,700 women, men and children). In the coming months, the number of families will be increased and about 1,000 families will benefit from the program. The families who receive support from the grocery store are not required to pay for any of the items.

The project is jointly run by the Tel Aviv-Yafo Municipality, Mesila, Tel Aviv Foundation, Lasova Association, and a team of dedicated volunteers. It is funded by the Tel Aviv-Yafo Municipality, private donors and charitable foundations.



ROAD SAFETY

Due to the pandemic, schools were closed across the city. With no alternatives available, hundreds of children from the community spent more time on the streets unsupervised, unfortunately resulting in an increase in vehicle and road safety related accidents.

As part of our efforts to provide information about road safety, we produced two videos together with the Or-Yarok Association: [an informational video intended for children](#) and features children from the community, as well as a video for parents which stresses the importance of adhering to road safety rules, wearing helmets, and more. The videos were circulated on social media and throughout all educational settings. Together with the Or-Yarok Association, we also prepared tailored workbooks dealing with road safety issues, and provided educational games which were distributed to the schools which a majority of children from the community attend.



SOCIAL PROTECTION AND ACCESS TO BENEFITS FOR CHILDREN OF BI VISA HOLDERS

Asylum seekers with B1 visas who have children under the age of 18 are entitled to receive financial benefits from the National Insurance Institute. These benefits are contingent on at least six months of employment during the past year and associated payslips documenting National Insurance Institute payments.

Mesila's Advocacy and Support Center worked with the National Insurance Institute to expedite the handling of requests made by asylum seekers with B1 visas in order to receive these benefits, which have not been processed since 2019.

In 2021, we extended assistance to 170 families who live in Tel Aviv, assisting in completion and submission of claim forms, and tracking the status with the National Insurance Institute. Currently, 60 families have already been approved. We also provided assistance to 20 families who do not live in Tel Aviv and were entitled to receive these benefits.

VULNERABLE YOUTH PROGRAM - REDUCING THE NUMBER OF UNACCOMPANIED CHILDREN WANDERING THE STREETS

Parents struggled greatly to manage the secondary effects of COVID-19; loss of livelihoods and the closures of schools brought uncertainty and instability to the community on many fronts. The disruption of daily routines compromised parents' abilities to care for their children, leading to a significant increase in the number of children of all ages wandering the streets of the Shapira, Neve Sha'anani and Hatikva neighborhoods, both day and night.

Mesila, in cooperation with the Community Administration at the Tel Aviv-Yafo Municipality established a project aimed at reducing this phenomenon. The project includes afternoon activities for children in HaRetzifim Garden in Neve Sha'anani, organized by the Community Administration.

The program is facilitated by a social worker and a local community worker from Mesila who conduct outreach and educational activities for children and their parents, and have supported the formation of a parents street patrol group. The program provides parental guidance on the dangers of unsupervised children wandering the streets, and offers a safe space for children to attend recreational activities during the afternoon and evening hours. A similar model is scheduled to be implemented in the Hatikva neighborhood.



RESILIENCE BUILDING FOR WOMEN & SEXUAL HEALTH EDUCATION

In recent years, a trained community outreach female staff person, who is also an asylum seeker, has been running a program designed to build resilience and address a wide variety of problems faced by women from the community. The program offers a supportive and inclusive therapeutic space for women, providing important information about parenting, sexual health, family planning etc., as well as a referral system for any required additional support mechanisms and services. This support infrastructure encourages women to genuinely engage in critical thinking of cultural norms and patriarchal frameworks, and share their experiences in order to lead change within their own community.

Since the outbreak of COVID-19 pandemic there has been a rise in domestic violence, an increased number of unwanted pregnancies, and growing incidences of women engaged in survival sex. Many of those women find guidance and support within the framework of this program.

Additionally, many young girls were exposed to inappropriate sexual content on the internet and on the streets during extended periods of lock-downs and quarantines. Following many reports of underage girls being exposed to, or engaged in inappropriate sexual behavior, we opened two parallel groups for mothers and for girls aged 8-9 on sexual health education and awareness, in collaboration with the Elem Association.

We have also produced a number of [animated informational videos](#) with tips for parents on how to discuss sexual health and sexuality with their children.

A THERAPEUTIC PLAYGROUND & TRANSLATION OF CHILDREN'S BOOKS INTO TIGRINYA AND ARABIC

Most asylum seekers live in small overcrowded apartments where children have few, if any, age-appropriate books and toys. The lockdowns and quarantines were especially difficult for children, who spent a lot of time at home without any stimulation or engagement. The team overseeing the therapeutic treatment for children prepared [books for children and toddlers in Tigrinya, Arabic, English and Hebrew](#). Board games and other games such as Lotto, Chutes and Ladders, and a memory game, where adapted with instructions in four languages. The books and games were distributed to at-risk children, children with special needs, and children of survivors of human trafficking and slavery, whose families are treated at Mesila.

We also filmed and circulated [story hour videos](#) in Tigrinya, English and Hebrew for community members, as well as [videos for parents](#) that contain suggested parent-child activities that can be done at home.

Furthermore, the therapeutic playground at Mesila holds dyadic (parent-child) therapy groups. During the summer months, the staff also held free music and theater activities for the children at the playground.





CAPACITY STRENGTHENING FOR EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATORS

Due to the shortage of afterschool programs and activities for children from the community, the community had set up their own afterschool programs - the educators are mostly Eritrean men, the language of instruction is Tigrinya, and the teaching methods are traditional, and at times even very strict.

The early childhood staff at Mesila developed a training course for the afterschool educators. The course aimed to enhance the skills and professionalization of the educators, while preserving the community's cultural values in these educational settings. The course offered diverse subject matter, including: an introduction to the Israeli institutions and agencies associated with the afterschool programs - schools, social services and law enforcement, classroom management tools, and alternatives to corporal punishment. 18 staff members from five afterschool settings took part in the course.

DISTRIBUTION OF DIRECT FINANCIAL ASSISTANCE TO COMMUNITY MEMBERS:

During 2021, community members began to return to work; however, the repercussions from the pandemic continue to linger. Many asylum seeker families still have difficulties paying bills, such as daycare, children's health insurance, food, rent, etc.

- Mesila has distributed:
- 3,700 food vouchers
- 7,782 food packages at Mesila and the social grocery store
- 1,010 boxes of diapers and baby formula
- 120 school bags and basic school supplies
- 470 packages of hygiene products
- Debts were paid off and healthcare insurance payments were made for 180 families with children with special needs
- We supported 130 families to pay for daycare and afterschool programs
- We distributed several dozen baby carriages, bassinets, cribs, bottles, pacifiers, clothing and toys that were donated to the community

MESILA

Approximately 33,500 asylum seekers and other undocumented people live in Tel Aviv-Yafo, of whom approximately 7,000 are children.

- **Mesila's vision** is to improve the quality of life asylum seekers in all aspects of their lives.
- The services we provide include information, mediation, advocacy, the exercise of rights, humanitarian aid, individual, family and group counseling, and assistance in dealing with the various municipal and

government agencies (education, health, social services). Furthermore, Mesila works to increase the accessibility of information on different subjects and advances and empowers the community through a variety of activities carried out with and for the community. Mesila is also engaged in raising awareness about the community situation in Israel, in addition to formulating and advancing national policy and conducting public information campaigns.

- Our services focus on the most vulnerable segment of the asylum seeker community: at-risk children and their families, children with special needs and their families, and survivors of slavery and human trafficking. We are committed to improve the quality of life of children in early childhood and strengthen the existing frameworks and structures within the community.
- Mesila's activities are developed and implemented in direct partnerships with community leaders and community based organizations. The organization's programs emphasize a localized approach to address the needs of the community while maximizing the community's strengths and assets.
- Our team is composed of 45 women, most of whom are social workers and pedagogical experts. We are assisted by 90 volunteers, who receive guidance and extensive training.

There are six units at Mesila:

- **Treating Children and Families At-Risk** - In 2021, the social workers treated **1,200 at-risk children** who were subjected to neglect, physical abuse, sexual abuse and extreme poverty, in addition to about 800 mothers and fathers and women caught within a cycle of violence.
- **Treating Children with Special Needs and their Families** - In 2021, the social workers treated **350 children with special needs** (including siblings). They provided social services, helped them exercise and access their rights, referred them to assessment tests, found suitable placements for them, held support groups, secured funding for health insurance, and more.
- **Providing Assistance to Children in Early Childhood** - The early childhood team works with the "babysitters" (pirate daycare centers) serving the community. In 2021, the team provided pedagogical training and guidance to 10 babysitters settings and provided tools and information for caregivers and parents for optimizing the care of the children. The team also provided guidance to the educators from five community afterschool settings and worked to find appropriate educational solutions for the children in the community.
- **The Advocacy and Support Center and Community Work** - The center assists mainly with the realization of individual and collective rights, initial social assistance and advocacy with an emphasis on: Children's rights (educational, health and social), women in the cycle of violence, health (children and adults), promoting policy changes etc. In 2021, our Advocacy and Support Center **received 4,600 applications**. The community work at the Center advances and empowers the community through diverse activities held with and for its members, develops leadership, promotes community projects, manages Mesila Facebook page, establishes groups of agents of change, and more.
- **The Paramedical Treatment Center** - the Center offers art therapy, occupational therapy and speech therapy to children treated by Mesila. In 2021, the Center treated **250 children** and their parents through a variety of individual and group therapies. The Center also runs a therapeutic playroom for parents and children.
- **The National Center for Survivors of Human Trafficking and Slavery** - the Center provides holistic therapy to asylum seekers who were abducted and tortured in the Sinai desert and held for ransom. Its services include psychosocial, humanitarian, financial and legal support, group therapy sessions and social activities. In 2021, the Center's staff treated **212 survivors of human trafficking and slavery and 168 of their children**. This year, the center began treating status-less women who were trafficked to Israel for prostitution, mostly from Eastern Europe.

**TO VOLUNTEER OR DONATE DRY FOOD / DIAPERS /
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PLEASE CONTACT:

MESILA@MAIL.TEL-AVIV.GOV.IL

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