



The American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee assisted disabled evacuees during the 2006 Lebanon War.

# Ruderman aids Israel's disabled

## Massachusetts native donates \$2M

By Elise Kigner  
Advocate Staff

A Boston-based philanthropy, the Israeli government and the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee are launching Masad Disabilities, the first centralized Israeli organization with the authority to implement nationwide policies to serve disabled Israelis.

"They have children, they have families, they have full lives, many serve in the army, yet they need special services," said Jay Ruderman, president of the Ruderman Family Foundation.

The Ruderman Family Foundation is committing \$2 million to a \$6 million project that will provide social services to Israelis with mental, physical or health-related disabilities. Masad will promote innovative nonprofits established by disabled people for disabled people and programs in previously underserved areas such as the Negev, the Galilee and Arab cities.

"The goal of this project will be to raise the standard of living, or to help formulate policy that will raise the standards for people with special needs," Ruderman said.

Citing a recent study published in the Jerusalem Post that found that one in five Israelis do not want a person with special needs living next door, Ruderman said he hopes the program will address perceptions of disabled people and raise awareness that "people with special needs are people just like you and I."

Most of the services for disabled Israelis are tailored to children, and there is a lack of programs for adults with disabilities, David Zackon, a representative from the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee, wrote in an e-mail.

The partnership will increase the number of Centers for Independent Living, service centers managed and operated for and by disabled people that provide peer counseling, technical troubleshooting with assistive devices, computer classes and arts and crafts workshops.

Two centers already operate in Jerusalem and Beer Sheva, and more are set to launch in Haifa, Tel Aviv, Eilat, the Upper Galilee region and an Arab city.

Masad also plans to implement policies that aim to prevent and curb obesity, smoking and drug use among people with disabilities and their caregivers and service providers.

"Masad will encourage the masses of disabled people to do more for themselves regarding basic health values and lifestyles and provide them with the means and options to achieve this independently," Zackon wrote.

The program will also ensure that families of the disabled are the primary support system by setting up support groups and mentoring programs for families and training social workers to better deal with the family-related issues.

In Massachusetts, the state Ruderman called home before making Aliyah several years ago, he funds efforts to help Jewish children with special needs, including Gateways, the Newton organization that provides educational services to students with disabilities at Jewish day schools and synagogues.

Ruderman hopes Gateways, which was formed as the result of the merger of two different community organizations in 2006, will serve as a model for Masad's work in Israel.

A few communities in Israel now have a program that brings people in the community to the house of a person with disabilities two or three times a week to help with daily tasks, such as picking up medicine or repairing a window, and Ruderman said he would like to see this implemented on a national scale.

"My understanding is there is not one place for them to turn, so someone with special needs would have to decide where they turn to for issues of employment, health and getting through daily life," he said. "[Masad] will bring everything together."