



**JDC Israel Eshel**  
Touching Lives, Transforming Communities

# Warm Homes

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A Model for Establishing and  
Operating a Warm Home





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# Warm Homes

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A Model for Establishing and Operating  
a Warm Home

Sofia Borisov, Hany Rooze

## Introduction

Loneliness among older adults in Israel has considerable medical and social implications, both for the older adults and their families. Health and social service professionals are increasingly aware of the fact that the unprecedented demographic changes of the last decades require a serious response.

The Warm Homes program, developed originally by JDC's Department for the Former Soviet Union, is an example of 'importing' a successful program and of fruitful cooperation among JDC's different branches. The program, inexpensive and easy to operate, aims to relieve the loneliness of older adults and enrich their lives by providing weekly meetings with their peers and neighbors in the community.

The professionals behind the program spent the past seventeen years developing customized models to address the needs of different populations in Israel, such as new immigrants, Holocaust survivors, Bedouins, older adults with age-related cognitive decline, and bereaved parents.

This document provides the information gathered over the years in order to assist other health and social service professionals set up and operate Warm Homes.

I would like to express my gratitude to the Ministry for Social Equality, our partner of many years, and to the Department for Senior Citizens in the Ministry of Welfare and Social Services, for adopting our Warm Homes model for Holocaust survivors, and their plans to adopt the model for other older adult populations.

I would also like to express my gratitude to Sofia Borisov of JDC-Eshel, 'mother' to over 330 Warm Homes throughout Israel, for her longstanding work and commitment to this successful venture.

**Yossi Heymann**  
CEO, JDC-Eshel

Israel's older adult population is characterized by cultural, physical and geographical diversity with correspondingly different needs. It is vital that this diversity be adequately addressed. Aging populations and rising life expectancy pose many challenges for policy makers and older adult care managers, and require creative thinking in order to supply a wide array of communal services.

The Warm Homes program developed by JDC-Eshel excels in its simplicity, effectiveness and flexibility, and in its adaptability to the different needs of Israel's diverse populations.

By recruiting a volunteer and creating an intimate group, the Warm Home successfully relieves loneliness and strengthens its members' sense of belonging. This model provides a unique solution for special populations, for the peripheral regions and for older adults who require intimate frameworks.

The fact that many local authorities voluntarily adopted this program testifies to its effectiveness.

For the past five years the Ministry of Welfare and Social Services has been happy to participate professionally and financially in the Warm Homes program for Holocaust survivors.

As of 2016, the Ministry decided to expand the Warm Homes programs for all populations, focusing on the rural sector, peripheral regions and special populations, so completing the continuum of community services for the older adult population.

I would like to thank all parties involved - especially to the JDC-Eshel professionals who developed the program. I would especially like to express my gratitude to the hundreds of hosts who weekly welcome over 5,000 older adults into their homes, to independently participate in a variety of activities.

## **Galit Mevorach**

**Director of Services for Senior Citizens**

**Government of Israel's Ministry of Welfare and Social Services**

## Background

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Many studies, in Israel and worldwide, associate social support in later life with physical and emotional welfare. Older adults with a strong social support network use the services available to their age group more effectively and are better able to cope with the aging process. Accordingly, the current tendency is to use the benefits of informal socio-communal networks to provide older adults with the ongoing care and support they need. With that, present demographic and social tendencies indicate a future decline in the availability of these formal and informal support networks.

Research shows that loneliness is a common social phenomenon among older adults. Dr. Sharon Shiovitz-Ezra of the School of Social Work and Social Welfare at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem (2009) was the first to compare loneliness in later life in Israel with other countries. Her study also compared the sub-groups of which Israel's older adult population is composed. According to this study, half of the older adults (75+) living in Israel reported strong feelings of loneliness during the week. Loneliness in Israel is especially common among women aged 75 and over, those separated from their spouses, widowers, and in the Arab sector.

Loneliness has negative consequences for older adults on all levels. Loneliness adversely affects both physical health, for instance high blood pressure and heart diseases; and mental health and quality of life as expressed by depression and sleep disorders. In contrast, social support has been proven to positively affect these symptoms.

Another study (Litwin, 2004) compared older native Israeli adults with immigrants from the FSU who arrived in Israel in the 1990's. This study showed that immigrants tend to have diminished social networks and limited ability to determine their interpersonal world.

Change in place of residency usually adversely affects the welfare of new immigrants due to the difficulty in coping with the many changes taking place in their lives within a brief period: residency, nutrition, culture, language, values, social changes and so on. This change can have a harmful impact on both physical and mental health.

A study of immigrants from the FSU found additional factors that could complicate their absorption process

(Litwin, 1995). These include the difficulty of grasping the concept of a free market, feelings of guilt due to having left children behind, difficulty in integrating successfully in the work force, and in consequence, low self-esteem.

In light of the social trends described above, several programs developed over the past few years aim to strengthen the social support networks of older adults in Israel, and especially of new immigrants. One of these is the Warm Homes program that was developed to provide informal social support for older adults who, for a variety of reasons, do not attend community centers or older adult day care centers, or are unable to successfully integrate into them.

The project implemented in Israel is based on the model successfully operated by JDC's Russian department in the FSU, and further developed by JDC after the Communist era. The first Warm Homes in Israel were introduced in 1998 and were an immediate success. The Second Lebanon War in 2006 served to emphasize the importance of such a program. During the war, Warm Home participants kept in touch and met regularly. In the bomb shelters, where they spent long hours, they sang, shared experiences from previous wars, and supported one another. It later became apparent that in comparison with other populations who did not participate in the Warm Homes program, they found it easier to cope during this difficult period. In light of these findings, JDC-Eshel decided to set up more Warm Homes in the north of Israel and in the areas surrounding the Gaza Strip, setting up an additional 80 Warm Homes during 2007 – 2008.

As of 2017, over 330 Warm Homes have opened throughout Israel with 5,500 participants. Most of the Warm Homes operated successfully, although naturally over the years there has been some turnover of participants, and occasionally of hosts.

# PROGRAM GOALS

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The main goal of the program is to alleviate loneliness among older adults living in the community and provide them with an informal social framework through regular weekly meetings in the hosts' home.

**Operating Model:** The program is based on a 'host' (or host family), who holds bi-weekly meetings in their home for a group of up to fifteen older adults (the limited number of members stems from the importance of maintaining intimacy). The schedule and meeting topics are chosen by the group members and by the host, who usually also serves as moderator. From time to time the meetings may include guest lecturers and special activities to celebrate holidays. The success of the program is measured by the group's importance for its members, their willingness to attend regularly, share and actively participate and by the dynamics in-between meetings. Mutual visits, frequent phone calls, caring for sick group members, going to performances or shopping together. Participants contribute to the extent they are able and share moments of joy and grief with each other. The program also stresses the importance of strengthening ties with the community by, for example, having volunteers participate as guest lecturer and having group members volunteer in their community.

**Group Members:** One of the main factors contributing to the program's success is the homogeneity of the group. For this reason it is important to ascertain that members have similar cultural backgrounds and interests, such as music, literature, the ability to respect one another and actively participate in the group. All these are essential elements for creating a strong social support network among members.

The first Warm Home programs were for new immigrants from the FSU, but it quickly became apparent that this was a successful and relevant model and that the need for Warm Homes existed not only in this population but also among new immigrants from Ethiopia and Argentina, in the Arab sector and among kibbutz members.

# WARM HOME

## Implementation Process

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**Identifying the need** – usually carried out by professionals in the local authority or NGOs.



**Finding an organization to set up and run the program**, such as associations for older adults, community centers, or volunteer organizations.



**Finding a host** – through professional workers, key community members, or key activists.



**Finding a core group** (3-5 members) – through the organization operating the program in collaboration with the host.



**Holding three or four preliminary meetings** – conducted by the host (and a professional worker, if required) in order to match expectations, outline preliminary rules, and exchange information.



**Continued locating of additional group members** by the host, the core group members and the professionals.

# HOSTS - Characteristics and Roles



The hosts are a key element in the program's success, and are carefully chosen based on the following criteria:

- Speak the relevant language.
- Capable of initiating, organizing and presenting the content and activities.
- Highly motivated for the role.
- Pleasant, energetic and warm personality, able to create a pleasant atmosphere in the home.
- Patient, tolerant and able to give of themselves to others.
- Have an accessible home that can comfortably host the group.

# TYPES of ACTIVITIES

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The host is responsible for the meeting content together with the group members. Although each Warm Home has its own way of conducting meetings, several activities are common to all Warm Homes, such as:

- Celebrating birthdays
- Celebrating holidays
- Lectures
- Social games
- Physical exercise
- Singing
- Watching movies
- Group discussions
- Sharing life stories
- Sharing photos and memories
- Sharing travel experiences

The program helps develop relationships under professional supervision and in collaboration with community-based organizations. Refreshments are basic and usually consist of hot beverages and cookies. Over time and as the relationships among group members strengthen, the participants select their own refreshments and help to prepare them.

# RESPONSIBILITIES OF THE OPERATING ORGANIZATION:

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## Recruiting Participants

After identifying the need and understanding the solution that the Warm Home offers, the organization chosen to operate it must find a host compatible with role requirements and compose a core group of members who know each other to serve as the Warm Home's backbone and formulate the group's identity. The operating organization should then assist in finding additional group members. This process usually takes a couple of months. The gradual setting-up process helps formulate a homogenous group and facilitate continued activity over time.

## Help with Equipment and Resources

The operating organization should help the Warm Home find basic equipment as needed, such as chairs, tables, fans, computers, books, and movies in the relevant language. It is also responsible for refunding refreshment expenses, and assists in directing volunteers and lecturers for special activities.

# JDC-ESHEL PROFESSIONAL OVERSIGHT

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Enriching the toolbox  
for additional activities



Expanding knowledge  
on different subjects  
connected with aging



Create a group of  
professional and  
personal affiliation



Strengthening ties  
between the hosts

# SPECIAL MODELS

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Over the past few years we have developed additional models tailored to address the needs of specific populations:

## **Warm Homes for Holocaust Survivors**

With the increase in average life expectancy, more and more Holocaust survivors reach old age. Many of them are confined to their homes due to physical or emotional reasons. These survivors do not attend the various social clubs but still need social contact and a peer group to socialize and engage with. Warm Homes for Holocaust survivors provide a support group for survivors who have experienced similar traumas, and when necessary, offer solutions for the benefit of the survivors and their families.

## **Warm Homes for Bereaved Parents**

In recent years, the Defense Ministry's Department of Families and Commemoration has paid special attention to the older adult population in bereaved families, providing them with unique projects and services. Over 70% of bereaved parents and over 50% of widows are aged 60 and up.

The Warm Homes program enables these families to find intimate reference groups, together creating a common interest support group that is accompanied by a welfare worker employed by the Ministry of Defense. Participants in these Warm Homes include families who do not want to take part in larger community groups as well as families who do want to take part in community activities.

## **Warm Homes for People with Age-Related Cognitive Decline**

The purpose of this model is to retain the social and cognitive status of older adults in the early stages of cognitive decline. Often, in light of the decline in some of their cognitive skills, this population finds it difficult to participate in social and leisure activities as in the past, despite their desire to do so. Regular senior centers are usually unsuitable, and they are unable or unwilling to participate in adult day care centers. The Warm Homes program enables these seniors to meet people in similar situations in an intimate setting. Additionally, a counselor visits the Warm Home once a week to engage participants in a variety of activities geared towards retaining their cognitive abilities as much as possible.

### **Warm Homes for Homebound Older Adults**

In this model the Warm Home is located in the home of a housebound older adult who is incapable of leaving his or her home but is still interested in contributing and being as active as possible. The host is responsible for content, while the physical aspects of hosting are carried out by the spouse / caretaker or another member of the group.

### **Traveling Warm Homes**

In certain places it was difficult to locate a permanent host despite much interest in the Warm Home activities. This model upholds the principles of the Warm Home project while responsibility is divided among at least four group members. Each member hosts the group in turn and is in charge of content. This model strengthens group members' sense of belonging and responsibility.

### **Warm Homes for Older Bedouin Adults**

This model is tailored to the Bedouin sector, where there is a shortage of social services for older adults, most of whom do not leave their homes. Participating in this model are Bedouin women who, for various reasons, spend most of their day alone at home. Participants were recommended by social workers from the welfare departments of the various towns. The program provides these women with an opportunity to meet, share experiences and improve their skills, especially in basic literacy and crafts.

### **Rural Warm Homes**

This program takes place in kibbutzim and moshavim where there is a shortage of services for older adults. In this model social activities take place in a public space and not in the relatively small private homes that do not permit the activities of a large group.

### **Regional Conferences for Hosts**

Since 2008, JDC-Eshel has organized bi-annual regional conferences for Warm Home hosts. These conferences expand their knowledge on various topics relating to old age, enrich their toolbox with additional activities, strengthen the ties between the hosts, and consolidate a personal and professional reference group.



The Warm Homes program is a simple, inexpensive and efficient operating model developed by JDC-Eshel in 1998. The program has since been implemented and operated successfully in dozens of local authorities in Israel by various NGOs and other organizations dealing with old age.

This document is based on the information gathered over many years of developing and perfecting the model, and presents the project's principles and the basics of setting up and operating a Warm Home unit. The intention is to help other professionals to set up Warm Homes to improve the quality of life of older adults in Israel.



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