

## Ramallah Elderly Day Care Center

### The elderly in Palestine –

#### A vulnerable sector

The present situation of the

elderly in Palestine is extremely serious with great needs existing. In response to this situation, the Palestinian Governmental sector has done its best attempt to draw attention to the needs of this community. In the year 2000, the PNA Ministry of Social Affairs held a coordination meeting with NGOs working in this area as well as other NGOs working in cognate projects. Caritas Jerusalem was invited to this meeting in order to better serve the elderly and stay up-to-date on their current needs.

It was revealed that elderly citizens (65+ years of age)<sup>1</sup> of the West Bank are classified as among the most vulnerable groups of the Palestinian population and among the least assisted by the government and other institutions. Unfortunately, no detailed statistics on the current situation of the elderly has been published.<sup>2</sup> However, the PNA Ministry of Social Affairs, during this meeting, urged more NGO's to work with this sector. The Minister of Social Affairs, Mrs. Intisar Al Wazir, praised Caritas Jerusalem's program and the program was included as a part of the national plan for the elderly in the Palestinian Territories.

It is estimated that the elderly population in the West Bank currently represent about 4% of the population<sup>3</sup>. Being perhaps the smallest percentage of all age groups and with the focus of projects and activities by NGO's for the youth in Palestine, this circumstance has left the seniors virtually forgotten and untargeted in most projects or services. Many Palestinian elderly feel totally forgotten and forsaken. Palestinian seniors face many problems and hardships and among the most identified are the following.

#### Insufficient Health Care and Social Welfare assistance

The PNA Ministry of Social Affairs gives senior citizens a monthly stipend of 90 NIS (approximately €17/21\$). This amount is not enough even to cover a small part of their daily expenses and needs, medications or even their health insurance.

The recently developed health insurance system of the Palestinian National Authority is in its initial stages and it only covers basic medical check-ups or referrals to other physicians and it only covers basic medicines, such as those for headaches or muscle aches. Even with this coverage in place, only 54% of the elderly in the West Bank are covered by health insurance service<sup>4</sup>. The elderly population, who suffers from chronic sicknesses and need constant follow-up and

**Working to fulfill a Biblical command to care for elderly**

**“Cast me not away in the time of age: forsake me not when my strength fails” - Psalm 71:8**

**Needing medicine can be a crisis for an elderly person**

**A pharmacist's story from Salfet, West Bank - “The other day an old woman came up to me in the pharmacy. She has a prescription for three medications, the total of 9 NIS (\$2.10 USD). She told me 'I have no money to pay for these.' I felt bad for her and gave her the money. I often deal with patients who are too poor to buy the medications prescribed by the doctor. They ask: 'Which one is the most important? I can't afford both.'” From the MDM report, The Ultimate Barrier, compiled in the second half of 2004**

<sup>1</sup> In accordance with definition and statistics provided by the Palestinian Ministry of Social Affairs.

<sup>2</sup> Note: At the time of publication, the Palestinian Central Bureau of Statistics is working on a new demographic study focusing on the elderly.

<sup>3</sup> Demographic Indicators in Palestinian Territories, 1997-2003. [http://www.pcbs.gov.ps/phc\\_97/phc\\_t2.aspx](http://www.pcbs.gov.ps/phc_97/phc_t2.aspx)

<sup>4</sup> PCBS 2003 Nutrition Indicators in Palestinian Territories, 2002 unpublished.

special medicines for their ailments, has to look to private institutions, like Caritas Jerusalem, for assistance, or depend on their savings or the assistance of their children for their livelihood.

This fact was demonstrated recently in an August 2004 comprehensive survey conducted by the Palestinian Central Bureau of Statistics which showed that for 7.3% of the households in the West Bank and Gaza Strip, the first priority for their households was medicine.<sup>5</sup> Many of these households are headed by an elderly person or have an elderly dependent living in their homes.

### **Loneliness and the Emigration of children**

Many elderly also face the daily plight of loneliness due the death of family members or spouses and the lack of loved ones living nearby. This issue has been exacerbated with the ongoing emigration of the young out Palestine. This fact leaves the elderly vulnerable as children who leave the area are often for many years not able to offer any assistance to their elderly relatives as they cope with building a new life outside of the region.

### **Our response to this situation**

Since 1990, Caritas Jerusalem has been operating an Elderly Day Care Center in Ramallah. It is one of the few programs in the West Bank in favor of the elderly. This center has become one of the most important social services for the senior citizens in the Ramallah district and it serves a community of more than 70 needy and lonely elderly (out of which 55 attend the center regularly).



S.K. is from Ramallah and suffers from Osteoporosis. She broke both legs in a fall and she is unable to walk without a walker. She is a widow and has been living alone for a long time since she does not have family members nearby to take care of her.

Caritas Jerusalem hired a home care assistant through donations received from *La Piccola Famiglia* (an Italian NGO partner organization) to help S.K. three times a week with cooking and cleaning the house. The other three days, the Ramallah Elderly Day Care Center provides her with a hot meal through a visit of one of the volunteers. The Caritas Jerusalem Social Department also continues to cover S.K.'s daily living expenses and bi-monthly utility bills (electricity, water etc).

**“Pure, unspoilt religion, in the eyes of God our Father, is this: coming to the help of orphans and widows in their hardships, ...” – James 1:27**

through a well integrated program that addresses their social, medical, physical and emotional needs. CJ relies on grants, local community support and contributions from private individuals to support the center. The center also relies heavily on the support and input from a large volunteer base of young people who give their time in support of the elderly. Past support for the center's work has come from Caritas member organizations as well as Church affiliated organizations. We wish to thank the organizations and individuals whose support makes this program possible.

The elderly center not only provides a secure and clean environment for the elderly, but also offers and organizes activities offering a chance for young men and women to get acquainted with the special needs of Ramallah's senior community. This center focuses on improving the quality of life of the elderly

<sup>5</sup> [http://www.pcbs.org/press\\_r/econ\\_9the.pdf](http://www.pcbs.org/press_r/econ_9the.pdf), page 10