

The American Friends of the Association for the Advancement of
Community Centers in Israel, Inc.

The Israel Association of Community Centers Ltd.
Application For Grant From

“Re'im,” is a unique social club, at the “Ginot Ha'ir community center in Jerusalem. “Re'im” is intended for youth with learning disabilities and communication problems, people who have “fallen through the cracks” throughout their lives; they do not belong to special education programs, but were not accepted by “normal” society either.

Problem Introduction:

The number of children, youth and adults with communications problems is not exactly known, although it is cautiously estimated at 20% of the population. There is also very low awareness for the social alienation of people with learning disabilities who communicate in a different style than the accepted norm. These people are always a bit different from their peers, a difference that leads to alienation, social isolation and low self-esteem.

No matter how much these people suffer, their families suffer with them. The parents worry that their children will never lead a “normal” life, remaining on the fringes of society and – according to research – mostly unstable in the workplace; unable to hold a job down they tend to change jobs often. They also worry that, lacking friends their age, they socialize mostly with their parents and adult friends of their parents, thus, precluded from developing the social skills necessary for their own age-group. Other siblings in the family often feel ashamed of them, as they are teased for having “weird” or “geeky” siblings. The children and youth themselves are misunderstood, put-down, humiliated, excluded, and made to feel “unwanted”. Under these circumstances their performance diminishes, their self-esteem plummets and additional – self-inflicted alienation – ensues. Further in the cycle, their own self-perception radiates on the environment, closing the cycle of isolation.

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Goals

- Provide a social framework for young people with communication difficulties and learning disabilities,
- Offer a (remedial) positive social experience to these persons
- Improve self-esteem through social inclusion.

The Objectives are:

- Empowerment and development of leadership skills, so that they may be able to advocate for themselves.
- Develop social and communications skills through hands-on experience in the group
- Provide enrichment and life skills
- Develop entrepreneurship skills for personal development and program sustainability

The idea became a program when the Merkaz Amim Tarbut Lano'ar Community Center in Jerusalem offered its auspices and the IACC offered professional supervision. So far, the program established two age groups: one for youth 18 to 29 years of age and another from 30 to 40 years of age. Each group has 10-25 participants who meet once a week for two to three hours of guided social activity, during the evening hours.

Activities aim to create social bonding between members of the group and a normative social ambiance of youth who do fun things together: outings to coffee shops, movies, travel, birthday and holiday celebrations, and courses such as cooking, sex education, palmistry and other topics that the participants ask for. Over the course of the first 6 months, the participating youth experienced personal growth and testimonies indicate strong bonding. For instance, some of these youth have telephone conversations with friends for the first time in their lives, and a 30 year old participant tells that this was the first time in his life that *friends* called to see how he was when he was ill. Others said this is the first time that they learned to retrieve messages from their cell phones, as in the past no one left them messages or called them. All of the participants feel very connected to their groups, like a lifeline, eagerly awaiting the next meeting, maintaining that the group meetings have “changed their life”.

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In the short time since the program began, two write-ups have been published: one in a local newspaper, the other in a national newspaper. The newspaper articles produced an avalanche of calls from all over the country, mostly from parents of youth who are too shy to call themselves. They all were hopeful that such an initiative came to light and are hoping that a similar group could be initiated in their area. One radio-talk program discussed the initiative as well, and that produced another wave of calls from all over the country.

The avalanche of requests to begin a program in their communities prompted the program's initiators to seek funding to replicate it in other communities, to expand the model to include groups beginning at the age of 6, and to organize national youth get-togethers so that they may get a chance to meet and share with other youth like them. The suggestion is to begin programs in areas across the country and in a variety of communities: north, center, and south of the country, large urban, peripheral, and farming communities, high concentrations of new immigrants, non-Jewish populations, and various age groups, at least 10 such groups, in the first year monitored by a formative evaluation.

The ideal is to initiate 20 new groups every year, that will form, bond, and receive entrepreneurial skills as a means of developing important life and social skills to the best of each participant's ability, developing program sustainability through their initiatives and maintain vibrant activity with a purpose. The program provides training for remunerated program coordinators/ counselors and is considering the option of including training people in each community who are interested in becoming involved with the program as volunteers. In addition, each group will try to invite as many lecturers from various non-profit groups and agencies as possible (ex: health nurses, doctors from the HMOs, professionals from associations promoting various issues that are of interest to the groups, etc), thus cutting down expenses for activities.

The program provides at least 4 days of professional upgrading for the staff and two national get-togethers that provide opportunities for youth to meet peer from all over the country and share experiences. Parent groups are another area that necessitates urgent development as many families feel that they lack the understanding and the necessary skills required in order to assist their child.

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Budget

Seed money for first year group formation

Expenses

Two program counselors (10 hrs/wk)	\$ 10,000
Outside lecturers	\$ 500
2 annual youth get-togethers	\$ 750
4 days of staff training	\$ 350
Parent groups	\$ 500
<u>Workshops, activities, trips</u>	<u>\$ 5,000</u>
Total	\$ 17,100

Income

Participation fees (40 participants)	\$ 5,800
Dept. for special needs populations	\$ 1,300
<u>Shortfall</u>	<u>\$ 10,000</u>
Total Income	\$ 17,100