

Social workers flay security

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For In Jerusalem

Since the assault on two social workers last month by a client in a local welfare office; municipal social workers have protested the lack of security. Minimum security arrangements have been upgraded in the welfare offices, but social workers believe they are still vulnerable.

They are sometimes depicted as front-line shock absorbers in society's relationship with its marginal elements, said Prof. Eliezer Jaffe, who teaches at the Hebrew University's Paul Baerwald School of Social Work. "Social workers are dealing with the torn fabric of society and are in there with a needle trying to sew it up."

Not all social workers find themselves in threatening situations. Jaffe, a former municipal director of family and community services, said most of the violence is perpetrated against social workers by clients involved in custodial or divorce battles. Drug abusers are also responsible for incidents of violence.

In a dramatic incident three years ago in Migdal Ha'emek, a man walked into the welfare office and fatally stabbed his wife's social worker. The country's social workers then went on a one-day strike to protest their lack of protection.

The assault in Jerusalem also was met by outrage on the part of the city's 1,000 social workers. Most are

government/municipal employees, many of whom work in Jerusalem's four regional welfare offices or the sub-stations in areas such as Ramot, Gilo and East Talpiot.

"We are more angry than afraid," said a social worker from the northern Jerusalem office where the social workers were assaulted. "This doesn't happen every day, but the thought that no one took into account that it could happen was outrageous."

"There was little security at the office. The guard was ineffective and didn't carry a weapon or wear a uniform," said the woman, who asked not to be named. Clients could enter freely and walk around the two-storey Rehov Hanevi'im building. "No place was out of bounds."

Since the Jerusalem incident, security has been tightened, she said. An electric door was installed and the guard was replaced. Now, a guard ushers clients into a waiting room where they are supposed to wait for the social worker.

But a social worker at the city's western welfare office said she hadn't noticed a great change since last month's incident. She also noted that the police had been called in to remove clients at least four times in the last two months.

"The upper echelon is not assuming responsibility for the protection of the workers, and the workers feel very much alone," she said.

Part of the problem is that clients

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frequently use threats to try to get something, with no real intention of harming the social worker, Jaffe said. When a violent incident occurs, the social worker usually consults the supervisor, who decides whether to call the police. The management, however, often doesn't take the complaints seriously, he said, and has made no attempt to work out clear security guidelines.

"The city likes to play down the whole thing. They're afraid that if you open a police file, you may incite more violence; but if you leave it alone, it'll cool off. Most times it will cool off, but everything is handled sporadically, not systematically," Jaffe said, noting no statistics have been collected, and no one knows how widespread the violence is.

According to Yossi Meller, Jerusalem branch secretary of the Social Workers' Association, after the murder in Migdal Ha'emek the association established a committee to deal with the prevention of violence. It has met with representatives of

the police to discuss constructive means of handling violent situations. But these measures are not enough, he believes.

Social workers should be trained to deal with potentially dangerous situations, by physical or psychological means, he said. He proposed self-defence training or workshops to discuss the origins and patterns of violence and how to handle it.

Meller also recommended there be a guard at every welfare office to admit clients. Although some people believe that arming the guards would be a good preventive measure, Meller believes that weapons can have a boomerang effect. Chemical sprays for self-defence might enrage an aggressive client.

"The idea is to provide minimum visibility and maximum protection, without interfering too much in the work," Meller said.

According to deputy city spokesman Tirtsah Frenkel, the municipality is developing new systems to ensure social workers' safety. For security reasons, she would not elaborate. But she did say that the department was exploring the possibility of providing self-defence training for workers and intended to work closely with the police.

"When a municipal worker is attacked, it also becomes a police issue," she said, although she acknowledged it was "the city's responsibility, as the employer of social workers, to ensure their safety."