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Generous Donation



Science Minister
Hershkowitz Photo:
Alex Kolomoisky

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\$7 million for national service program

US Jewish funds offer donations to support national service program but government appears to be dragging its feet

Yaheli Moran Zelikovich

Ten major US Jewish funds have offered [Israel](#) financial support amounting to some \$7 million to promote national service for population groups which are less likely to be accepted into the IDF or not accepted at all, such as Arabs, haredim, those with disabilities, youth from disadvantaged backgrounds, and young immigrants.

But the government remains undecided on the issue – months after the generous offer was first proposed.

Today there are just 1,300 national service places available though there are some 4,500 young people who would like to contribute to the State, partly because many rights in civilian life are dependent on national or military service. The funds say the financial support is dependent on a government decision to add 500 places each year for a period of four years.

Various organizations are behind the idea, including the Gvanim Association for Education and Community Involvement, Bat Ami, Ma'ase, JDC Israel, and the Gandy Foundation.

These organizations aim to enable significant national service for young people. For them, volunteering is a way of reducing social rifts and making young people productive, drawing them out of the weaker social stratum.

In 2007 the national service directorate in the Prime Minister's Office was founded, and is now under the Ministry of Science and Technology. During the service year 2008-9, the directorate issued a tender that enabled 1,000 additional young people to take part in the national service program.

Dvir Me'udeh, from Sderot, volunteers in national service in the Takhlit Center for children in danger of dropping out of school. He suffers from cerebral palsy, and uses a wheelchair. In the program framework, he does office tasks and gives private lessons in English and Mathematics.

'Another way of contributing'

"I wanted to join the IDF but I couldn't," he says. "This is the first time in my life that I'm working. It's really satisfying, they need me there. It makes me feel significant, and it's good to know and hear that you are important in children's lives. National service is another way of contributing to the State, and there's no need to despair if the army doesn't want you. It really builds your character, you learn a lot about yourself, it's important."

Ronit Amit, manager of the Gandy Foundation which supports social organizations, met Science Minister Daniel Hershkowitz ([Habayit Hayehudi](#)) and Ministry officials in an attempt to promote the proposal.

"About half of Israeli 18-year-olds are not recruited by the army," she said. "Most are from disadvantaged groups, for whom this almost certainly means they will remain in the lower socio-economic groups. Thousands of young people want to volunteer for national service but there is no place for them. They get in touch with all sorts of organizations but they have no place for them."

Winds of Change?

Spike in number of Arabs volunteering for National Service / Anat Shalev

Data show 1,400 Israel-Arabs joined program in 2009. Placement organization head attributes tend to 'strong desire to integrate into Israeli society'

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"The Tal Law protects the haredim, so that any haredi who wants can get a place, but if you are Arab or have disabilities, the State says, 'We've got nothing for you'," she adds.

Hershkowitz responded, "This is an important proposal which may promote national service in Israel. I am working with the Finance Ministry to create the necessary palces and I hope that the project will soon get the green light."

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