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US veterans groups seek trauma treatment model from Israeli experts

• By YAAKOV KATZ

American military veterans' groups recently traveled to Israel to study different models developed by NATAL, Israel's Trauma Center for Victims of Terror and War, for treating discharged soldiers suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD).

NATAL was established 12 years ago and became the first organization to provide multi-disciplinary counseling and support for discharged soldiers and former prisoners of war. Interest in NATAL's services dramatically increased during the second intifada, to help treat victims of terror attacks and their families.

According to NATAL CEO Orly Gal, three groups of American veterans recently visited NATAL's clinics in Israel to examine the different models the organization uses to treat Israelis suffering from trauma.

"The groups came here to learn more about how to treat soldiers who return from Iraq and Afghanistan," Gal said, adding that the NATAL staff had shared with the groups their experiences from the Second Lebanon War in 2006 and Operation Cast Lead earlier this year.

"In some cases, we are treating fathers who served in the Yom Kippur War and [their] sons, who fought in Lebanon or Gaza," she said.

Research has shown that roughly 10 percent of combat veterans suffered from symptoms of PTSD, which can appear immediately or as a delayed reaction, said Gal.

"These young men and women tend to deny or repress their emotional difficulties, and NATAL seeks to help them through individual and group counseling, allowing them to share their experiences while empowering them to heal," she said.

Prof. Avi Bleich, chairman of NATAL's professional steering committee and director of Lev-Hasharon Psychiatric Hospital, said some of the groups had expressed interest in the activities at NATAL clinics, while others were more interested in the hotline the organization set up several years ago for trauma victims reluctant to seek treatment at the clinics.

"The non-governmental NATAL model is important since there is not always insurance coverage for mental health treatment, and discharged soldiers do not always feel legitimacy to openly seek treatment," Bleich said.

"Organizations like NATAL motivate these people to come and speak about things since we are not part of the establishment."

NATAL's hotline number is (1-800) 363-363.