

Spooked by last year, Jerusalem braced for the snow

Last week's mild snow was a trial run for the city's emergency services to test their preparedness. (Illustrative photo: Marc Israel Sellem)

From elephants to emergency medicine, the sudden cold snap taxed city resources

• By EITAN AROM

When I reached Tami Siboni by phone and asked her if it was a good time to talk, she responded that if I were to wait for a good time, I would never find one.

Siboni directs the Jerusalem Municipality department that oversees emergency services for homeless people. And nearly a week after the cold weather and sleet had rolled into the city, it was still keeping her and her employees extremely busy.

The large-scale destruction wrought by last year's storm put the capital on edge. Both the municipality and residents braced for impact.

For Siboni and her staff, that meant expanding their shelter capacity from 16 to 40 people – by renting rooms at hotels across the city.

“It’s a lot – it’s more than double,” she said in an interview Tuesday. “And now we have a lot of work because we have to see and treat all these people, and see if they can get from the hotel or from the shelter to another place, not to the street again.”

Whereas for most Jerusalem residents the storm was a mere inconvenience, for inhabitants attempting to take shelter in abandoned structures or simply weathering it outdoors, it was life-threatening. As the municipality set up a situation room of utilities companies and emergency personnel leading up to the storm, Siboni’s team fanned out to search for those left in the cold.

They worked through the storm in rented 4x4 vehicles. While some refused their help (including, in some cases, mentally ill individuals), others took it gratefully.

In one case, Siboni said, social workers encountered a 71-year-old man who said he had purchased a plane ticket to Canada – he showed them the ticket – and had no money left to rent a room for the storm. They put him up in a hotel for the duration of the squall, and he left Monday under sunny skies.

“He was very grateful,” she said.



Few braved the Western Wall plaza last Wednesday. (Marc Israel Sellem)



Residents enjoy the snow in Sacher Park. (Marc Israel Sellem)



Most of the zoo animals spent the worst of the cold weather indoors and emerged to experience the last vestiges of the snow. (Yuda Peled)

IN A DIFFERENT branch of the municipal government, Dr. Assaf Brill, who manages the city's veterinary services, did his best to tend to Jerusalem's vulnerable non-human residents.

"In extreme weather like we had last week, sick animals

can have problems surviving," Brill said. "They find places to hide, but they can get injured in very extreme weather if they are not healthy, and stray cats mostly are not very healthy."

For the cats, at least, little can be done in the way of protection. The city impounds dogs as a matter of policy, but cats are only trapped if they're sick, then released after they're treated, Brill said. (Brill asked me to advise readers that, for this reason, many dogs impounded by the city are currently looking for homes.)

In fact, since fewer people were outdoors, the municipal veterinarians got fewer calls than normal to pick up sick cats during the storm – despite staying open 24/7 and retaining a 4x4 vehicle to navigate the treacherous streets, he said.

By contrast, those same icy streets led to a larger-than-normal number of medical aid calls from the city's human residents.

Jerusalem's emergency medical responders geared up for the task, bracing for the slips, falls, bumps, bruises and in particular, the traffic accidents that accompany frigid conditions.

"What scares me on the road is not the snow, it's the drivers," said Daniel Katzenstein, the international relations director for United Hatzalah, an emergency medical service that works in parallel with Magen David Adom.

In addition to the extra burden created by snow- and cold-related accidents, normal medical incidents tax the city's emergency response system – as people are unable to navigate the slippery streets on their own.

"Many, many times, United Hatzalah doesn't touch births, because people say, 'OK honey, it's time to go,'" noted Katzenstein, adding that because of the weather many people had no other way to reach the hospital.

To brace for these conditions, United Hatzalah contracted for extra 4x4s to reach regions impacted by snow and sleet.

It approached the icy roads with an "any means necessary" approach, going so far as to plant United Hatzalah volunteers in police vehicles to get to hard-to-reach areas like Mevaseret Zion.

"From day to day, the police have a lot to do," said David Krispel, the organization's CIO, who helped coordinate the response from its downtown headquarters. "Robberies and all that, going here and there. But even thieves don't go out in the snow."

But United Hatzalah's effort in the inclement weather – dubbed Operation White Carpet – was more an exercise in emergency preparedness than emergency response.

"We learned from last year, we prepared," said Katzenstein. "This was a trial snowstorm. We tested our systems."

UNITED HATZALAH is not the only organization that learned from last year's blizzard, which wreaked havoc by

downing trees across the capital.

Ora Ron and her volunteer group Ne'emanei Ilanot BeYerushalayim (Guardians of the Trees of Jerusalem) lobbied the city to prune overgrown trees and prevent them from falling.

The volunteers also took matters into their own hands, raising funds privately and hiring gardeners to prune trees in some areas, Ron said. In the areas they covered, she said, no trees fell in either this year or last year's tempest.

"It shows what volunteers can do with no money, no professional budget," she said.

Ron described the city's efforts at upkeep to be generally negligent, and reactive rather than proactive.

But properly spooked by last year, it seems, the municipality did take some precautions, trimming trees in some areas and urging residents to do the same on their own, where necessary.

For their part, residents were likewise spooked – stocking up on provisions before the storm rolled in and hunkering down in their homes. And with sleet and freezing rain far outstripping the snow, parents around the capital were busy creating indoor diversions for their children.

And they were not alone: Before the storm, caretakers at the Jerusalem Biblical Zoo devised activities to stave off boredom for animals that would be cooped up for days due to the unseasonable weather, said zoological director Dr. Nili Avni-Magen.

For the most part, the zoo's inhabitants weathered the rain-lashed weekend in indoor enclosures – "all the animals except the Israeli ones, they don't need indoor facilities," said Avni-Magen wryly.

For those that couldn't be moved, like the crocodiles, generators were set up to make sure they wouldn't suffer from cold.

But just as important as their physical health is their mental well-being. Avni-Magen said her team spends a lot of time coming up with "enrichment" activities – games and puzzles, largely – to keep the animals entertained. That effort was redoubled because of the weather.

"Before stormy days like we had this week, we sit for a few days, thinking or building if we need to, and preparing ourselves for the long days that we have to keep our animals busy indoors," she said.

Like the kids, the critters found some respite from their confinement on Saturday morning, as the skies cleared up and some snow clung to the ground. The heartier animals – elephants and tigers, for example – were allowed outdoors for a brief romp in the snow, Avni-Magen said.

Lessons learned from last year and an abundance of preparedness measures proved crucial in battling the cold and sleet. Though snowmen may have been decidedly lackluster, the city managed to weather the storm not much worse for wear. •

