



A child beneficiary of Al-Kafaat Association attends the news conference on Wednesday.

'Help us Mister President:' State urged to help defray costs of disability

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BEIRUT: Al-Kafaat Foundation's board of trustees president, Raif Shwayry, warned on Wednesday of social disaster if the government fails to disburse funds pledged to cover costs of rehabilitating the physically and mentally challenged.

Al-Kafaat, a public welfare institution, is home to 1,500 disabled Lebanese and employs 800 staff members who have so far served 20,000 citizens.

Speaking at a news conference at the Press Federation in Verdun, Shwayry urged President Michel Sleiman in an open letter to take the necessary steps to resolve the current issue and restore faith in the nation. "Your impartial command is needed. More than ever our children need your support," he added.

Shwayry said Al-Kafaat has juggled its finances and programs for years in order to continue helping its disabled population. He added that if the institution was to maintain its services, the government would have to disburse funds on the basis of actual economic data on the present cost of living.

In an interview with *The Daily Star* published Wednesday, Shwayry said the finance and social affairs ministries have been trading blame over the issue of providing financial support to institutions that care for the mentally and physically challenged. "The government, lacking public centers for rehabilitation, suggested that civil society organizations take charge with a yearly contribution from the Social Affairs Ministry, in a form of privatization of social welfare institutions," he said.

Shwayry added that the ministry has failed to honor its obligations and is today paying less than a third of the promised fees, based on the last cost study conducted by the ministry in 2004.

At Wednesday's news conference, Shwayry noted that the government had privatized the social welfare sector, but was not assuming its obligations by only paying one third of its required contributions. "There were no public centers for the rehabilitation of the disabled; there are still none in our present day," he said.

Shwayry added that that the ministry's agreement with civil society organizations required it to cover two-thirds of annual costs, while the non-governmental organizations are to pay the remaining third from private sources.

He also stressed that the costs of providing for the disabled

were underestimated in view of inflation. "As a matter of fact, current state subsidies are based on the study of costs conducted in 1996," Shwayry said.

He argued that the delay in payments had essentially turned non-profit organizations into investment banks that are funding the state.

Toward the end of the news conference, the mother of a girl with multiple severe disabilities took the stand to express her worries as a parent. She urged Sleiman to find a solution for the sake of her daughter.

Following her address, Lara, a young girl with cerebral palsy, made a personal appeal to Sleiman with the final words of the news conference: "Help us Mister President. Please make it your case to let the ministry pay its dues - we do not want to end up at home!"