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The State of Israel Response to the COVID-19 Crisis

Special Interim Report

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Foreword

We are in the midst of the second COVID-19 pandemic outbreak that is shaking the world and the State of Israel, significantly impacting our life and testing our personal and national resilience. During these times I believe that it is important for the State Comptroller's Office to continue its activity, subject to the current challenges, in order to improve the activity of Government authorities.

Our office monitored the Government's activity during the first wave, and during the first outbreak already began to conduct audits regarding several issues pertaining to the handling of the COVID-19 crisis and its effects, similar to the audits conducted in other countries in Europe and in the United States. These audits provided interim findings, and rectifying them could improve the functioning of government and public systems in handling the COVID-19 pandemic and the service provided to the public. In light of the importance of this issue, and the added value in correcting the deficiencies as quickly as possible, I found it appropriate to submit the interim findings to the Knesset and to publish these findings to the public.

This special report is published further to the interim findings published in September 2020 regarding the Government's handling of individuals who are unemployed as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic outbreak. The current report includes chapters addressing the Tax Authority's preparedness for the crisis and the Israeli Security Agency's (ISA) locating system during the crisis. It also includes interim findings on various matters, from the perspective of the individual, regarding the health system and the education system. I would like to stress that these interim findings were raised during audits still being conducted, and that these matters will be included in a complete and comprehensive report regarding the Government of Israel's handling of the COVID-19 crisis. The report is expected to be published in the course of 2021.

This audit report is published in addition to a special report of the State Ombudsman in my office that was published in September 2020. This report surveys the State Ombudsman's activity during the crisis and describes the complaints received during the first wave of the COVID-19 crisis, up to June 2020.

The importance of the matters examined is particularly evident at this time, in the midst of the second wave of the COVID-19 pandemic, and in light of the ensuing material implications regarding all matters relating to health, education and economic needs, in the aim of assisting the populations affected during and following the crisis, such as the Elderly, unemployed and furloughed individuals, and in respect of other needs as well. In such a reality, it is of great importance for the Government to act in a proper, efficient and effective manner.

The audit regarding **Aspects of the Tax Authority's activity during the COVID-19 crisis** indicated that, despite the Authority's rapid and advance preparation for ongoing functioning during the COVID-19 crisis, its customer service had difficulty providing a quick and efficient response to inquiries. Furthermore, deficiencies were found in the awarding of grants as determined by the government. It is recommended that the Tax Authority act to rectify the deficiencies s in order to improve its preparedness to operate alongside the COVID-19 crisis, and that in preparing to continue to contend with the pandemic, it periodically examine the economic damage caused to certain sectors and businesses, and accordingly assist in formulating exemptions for them.

In light of Israel's handling of the extensive spread of the COVID-19 pandemic, the Israeli Security Agency was authorized, initially by the government and subsequently by virtue of laws legislated by the Knesset, to contribute to the national effort to reduce the spread of the virus, by collecting and processing technological data. The audit regarding **Utilization of General Security Service's Technological Capabilities to Assist the Ministry of Health's Epidemiological Studies** found that the tools operated by the ISA did not enable it to fully fulfil the mission it received. Furthermore, the outputs of its activity reflect the potential of many individuals entering isolation, among them many who did not come in close contact with an infected individual. Considering the audit findings it is recommended to include the ISA findings, in a comprehensive and in-depth epidemiological investigation by questioning the infected individual. Furthermore, the Ministry of Health and the Ministry of Intelligence, with the assistance of the National Security Council, should act to effectively implement alternative digital means in lieu of the ISA tracking system. The Knesset State Audit Committee's sub-committee decided to maintain the confidentiality of certain parts of the State Comptroller's Office report regarding this matter in order to protect national security in accordance with section 17 to the State Comptroller Law, 5718-1958 [consolidated version].

In light of the interim findings regarding **Infrastructure for Remote Learning and Alternative Learning Spaces During the COVID-19 Crisis**, it is recommended that the Ministry of Education urgently complete the mapping of available end-user means in the homes of pupils and teachers, as well as access to internet connection; and act to urgently provide end-use means to pupils and teachers who do not possess such means, inter alia by engaging the third sector in distributing computers to disadvantaged pupils. It is also recommended that the Ministry of Education examine the matter of increasing the use of open spaces outside schools to conduct learning and meetings during this period.

The audit regarding **Care for Senior Citizens in Residential Care Facilities During the COVID-19 Crisis** found that 71,100 senior citizens resided in out-of-home institutions in April 2020, and that their share out of all COVID-19 deceased patients up to October 2020 was 36%. It is recommended that the Ministry of Health comprehensively examine various ways to isolate those residing in the institutions as a solution for stopping the contagion. It is also

recommended that the Ministry of Health examine the possibility of increasing the amount of tests performed to residents and workers in these institutions on weekends, due to the fact that according to the data as of August 2020 the number of tests performed on these days in the general population was more than 50% lower than during the other days of the week. It is also recommended that the Ministry of Health consider ways to optimally utilize the COVID-19 departments in geriatric hospitals for hospitalizing senior citizens.

On the issue of **Taking Samples and Laboratory Testing for Diagnosing COVID-19**, the findings indicate that there are 40 COVID-19 -testing laboratories in Israel; from mid-July to mid-August about 25,000 tests a day were administered on average. About 2 million COVID-19 tests were administered in Israel up to August 9, 2020. In light of the findings in this chapter it is recommended that the Ministry of Health find ways to improve the efficiency and shorten test processes and fully complete the collection of the data regarding the duration of the sampling and testing process; that it instruct to conduct quality assurance tests during the sampling stage; and that it analyze the reasons for incorrect test results and act to reduce their number. The Ministry of Health should consider the instruction to perform periodic tests for COVID-19 for the treatment and medical teams that come in contact with patients with a confirmed COVID-19 infection or with at-risk populations. The Ministry of Health should examine alternatives to the use of Styrofoam packaging for transporting the tests, that pollutes the environment.

The audit regarding **Community Health Services During the COVID-19 Crisis** indicated a 50% decrease in in-person visits to clinics in March-April 2020 compared to January-February the same year; the medical condition of some of the patients was severe, and avoiding a visit to a community clinic or to the hospital endangered their life. The audit also found that 3.4 million flu vaccines had been ordered, and that at the beginning of September 2020 preparedness for vaccinations had not been completed. To ensure that the largest possible population will be vaccinated against the flu, and that the vaccines will be performed safely and in a timely manner, it is recommended that a systemic plan for vaccinations be formulated. It is also recommended that the Ministry of Health, in collaboration with the Israel Medical Association professional unions, conduct a process for drawing conclusion regarding remote medicine based on the experience gained to date in this matter, and act to maintain the capabilities developed during the COVID-19 pandemic in order to elaborate and implement relevant regulations during routine times, in preparation for the outbreak of additional waves, should there be any.

The audit regarding **Epidemiological Studies to Break the Chain of Transmission** indicated that during the audit period (May-August 2020) the Ministry of Health did not have an advanced investigation system for an efficient management of the epidemiological investigation process. A random sample of 76 investigations conducted in the Jerusalem District in June and July 2020 indicated that about 64% of the epidemiological investigations began after four days or more after the diagnosis, even though the effective time to conduct such an investigation is 24-48 hours after receiving a positive

laboratory test's result and until the epidemiological investigation is completed. The audit also found that the investigations were documented on manual forms which are entered into an investigation management system at a later time, and that the part of the data entered is mainly based on free text, and not entered as a "smart" computerized form where data is selected from a list. Furthermore, even after increasing the number of epidemiological investigators, in September 2020 their percentage in Israel still remained small relative to their percentage in other countries.

This report reflects the State Comptroller's vision and goals, among them conducting constructive, relevant, objective and respectful audit that is facing future challenges, improving its activity and advancing the fulfillment of its mission for the public's benefit. The audit focuses on social issues, among them the service provided to individuals, as well as on the significant risks affecting the activity of the audited bodies, and acts to implement norms of integrity and propriety in government activity and public administration.

The audit, whose findings are presented in this report, was conducted by the Social and Welfare Division, the Economic Departments Division and the Defense Establishment Division in the State Comptroller's Office. I would like to thank the employees of these divisions as well as the other State Comptroller's Office employees involved in conducting this report for their professional, thorough and efficient work within a short timeframe, particularly during the COVID-19 pandemic outbreak.

The audited entities must act quickly and efficiently to correct the deficiencies that have not been rectified yet in order to improve the future handling of the COVID-19 crisis.

I wish us all optimal handling of the COVID-19 crisis and a safe return to routine life.



Matanyahu Englman
State Comptroller
and Ombudsman

Jerusalem, October 2020