



State Comptroller Of Israel | Special Report: The State of Israel's
Coping with the Covid-19 Pandemic | 2021

Welfare, Education, Health and
Employment Topics

Caring for Senior Citizens during the Covid-19 Pandemic



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Background

In January 2020, the World Health Organization declared the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic a public health emergency event with global implications. At the end of February 2020, the first Covid-19 infected person was diagnosed in Israel. The population of senior citizens¹ in Israel, numbering over one million people or 12% of the general population, was identified as the group most at risk for death and health complications from the disease, with the risk increasing with age. Functioning level varies significantly across this population, ranging from full functioning with no medical limitations to considerable medical and functional limitations.

To prevent the spread of the Covid-19 pandemic, the government imposed restrictions that considerably reduced the spaces in which the general population was allowed to stay, including the population of senior citizens. The restrictions affected senior citizens health-wise, mentally and financially.

The Ministry of Welfare and Social Affairs (Ministry of Social Affairs) operates, via the social services departments of the local authorities, a range of community frameworks intended to help senior citizens improve their personal and social functioning. The Ministry for Social Equality serves as an administrative body of the government for handling senior citizens' affairs, including promoting active aging, full utilization of and accessibility to rights and employment. Aside from the one million senior citizens living in the community, there were around 29,500 senior citizens in geriatric hospitals supervised by the Ministry of Health and in retirement homes run by the Ministry of Social Affairs (the geriatric hospitals and retirement homes will be referred to as the institutions).

¹ According to the Senior Citizens Law, 1989, a senior citizen is a resident of Israel who has reached retirement age, according to the Population Registry: 62 for women and 67 for men (according to the Retirement Age Law, 2004).



Key figures

1,1 million

the number of senior citizens in Israel. About 7% of them reside in institutions, housing clusters, and protected living residences

Approx. 92%

of all persons who died of Covid-19 pandemic were 60 and older by April 2021

Approx. 264,000

the discrepancy between the number of senior citizens in Israel according to the Population and Immigration Authority and their number according to the Central Bureau of Statistics

NIS 140 million

budget of the Magen Zahav ("Gold Shield") program for protecting the population of senior citizens living in the community against exposure to the covid-19 pandemic

38%

percentage of senior citizens who reported a high or medium degree of loneliness and isolation in the framework of the Magen Zahav program

40%

percentage of senior citizens whom the Ministry of Social Affairs did not succeed in contacting, out of the target population is defined in the framework of the Magen Zahav program

66%

by July 2021, the percentage of senior citizens whose needs the Ministry for Social Equality has not yet mapped, out of the target population as defined in the framework of the Magen Zahav program

2,500

number of auxiliary healthcare workers needed in the institutions according to the estimates of the Ministry of Health and Ministry of Social Affairs



Audit Actions



From May 2020 to July 2021, the State Comptroller's Office examined several topics concerning the care for senior citizens in the community and institutions since the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic. As regards the senior citizens in the community, the audit examined the actions of the state and local authorities to locate and map the senior citizens and their needs and the assistance provided to them for alleviating loneliness and isolation and maintaining an active life routine. Regarding senior citizens in institutions, the audit examined the shortage of workers at the institutions and maintaining contact between residents and their loved ones. In addition, as regards the

senior citizens in institutions, the interim report, from October 2020 examined: tests for identifying Covid-19 pandemic carriers in the institutions, provision of protective equipment for the institutions, solutions for senior citizens who are Covid-19 pandemic carriers, and building processes of the Magen Avot Ve'Imahot ("Fathers and Mothers Shield") program. The examination in this report is based on the State Comptroller's questionnaire distributed to a sample of local authorities; on the State Comptroller's questionnaire handed out to senior citizens in two age groups (67–75 and 76 and older); and on public involvement processes of senior citizens, directors of elderly day centers (Ofek) and directors of institutions, through focus groups.

Key findings

-  **Information on senior citizens at local authorities and in national and general databases** – Although senior citizens are a population that is likely to need assistance, especially in a time of emergency, by the audit end date, there is still no single body in Israel that centralizes basic information on them, and facilitates using an orderly mechanism, for the collection of data and its transfer to bodies involved in the care of senior citizens. Local authorities lacked information on senior citizens in need of assistance and their contact details, which delayed the provision of the aid, particularly at the time of the pandemic outbreak and during the first lockdown. Before the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic, there was no entity in the local authorities that centralized complete and updated information on senior citizens and their characteristics, which would have enabled offering assistance to this population with the outbreak of the crisis. The central database, which centralizes general information on the residents of the State of Israel – the Population Registry, did not contain at the time of the Covid-19 pandemic optimal information, including contact details, to enable the local authorities, government ministries, and other support organizations to locate and map the elderly population and approach them swiftly to extend assistance. Central Bureau of Statistics (CBS) data, though they are more updated and contain the phone numbers of senior citizens, were not used by the support organizations. Likewise, a discrepancy was found between the Population Authority and CBS databases, on the scale of 264,000 senior citizens (a disparity of 23%) – primarily due to senior citizens registered in the Population Registry and residing abroad.
-  **Gathering information on senior citizens and mapping their needs** – The Ministry of Social Affairs and the Ministry for Social Equality set a target, in the framework of the "Magen Zahav" ("Gold Shield") program, to map the needs of all the senior citizens (around a million people), without prioritizing support requirements. They achieved low mapping rates – the Ministry of Social Affairs about 30%, by February 2021, and the Ministry for Social Equality about 34%, by July 2021; they did not do a



follow up with the local authorities to which the information on senior citizens was transferred; and split the actions they carried out for mapping the needs of senior citizens, among other things, in terms of timing. Some local authorities expressed satisfaction with the mapping process, while others cited difficulties stemming from the multiplicity of entities approaching senior citizens, the double work entailed in identifying their needs, and inaccurate information they were given.

👇 A national repository of information on senior citizens to be used in states of emergency – It was found that the proposal put to the government by the Ministry for Social Equality in 2018 in the matter of "Assistance to Senior Citizens in a Time of Emergency," that includes the Ministry's responsibility for establishing a database on senior citizens for times of emergency, was not presented to the government, due to lack of agreement with the Ministry of Social Affairs. However, from March 2020, the Ministry for Social Equality established a database on senior citizens for the dual purposes of providing support for them during the period of the Covid-19 pandemic and preparing for future emergencies. To this purpose, the Ministry for Social Equality requested information on senior citizens from six central bodies holding information. In the lack of a norm mandating this, three of the bodies mentioned above did not give their approval to transfer the information – the Ministry of Social Affairs, the National Insurance Institute, and the Ministry of Aliyah and Integration. The local authorities, too, did not transfer the information it requested to the Ministry for Social Equality. This harmed the information infrastructure needed to support senior citizens during the Covid-19 pandemic and the infrastructure for setting up a database for future emergencies.

👇 Actions by the Ministry of Social Affairs and Ministry for Social Equality to alleviate loneliness and isolation of senior citizens in the community – The Ministry of Social Affairs recognized the importance of day centers² (Ofek) during this period and allowed them to open during the second wave of the pandemic, subject to the Purple Badge restrictions, by increasing rates and indemnifying the day centers for the non-arrival of senior citizens. However, the Ministry of Social Affairs provides a partial solution for the budgetary distress of day centers during routine times, directly affecting their ability to provide adequate services to senior citizens both in times of routine and emergency. A day center director said, for example, "to obtain a tablet for the elderly, I had to write a request in a Facebook group, here in the community, though it was unpleasant for me to make a request. I received an old tablet without a charger, and I am still looking for a suitable charger." Further, despite the vital need for supportive

² A social therapeutic framework intended for senior citizens living in their own homes but in need of personal care and interested in social activities with their peers.

communities³, the Ministry of Social Affairs budgets 285 supportive communities in 148 out of 256 local authorities, where 60,000–70,000 senior citizens are registered.

-  **Providing access to information for senior citizens** – The Ministry of Social Affairs and Ministry for Social Equality did not inform the senior citizens they contacted about the solutions offered by the other ministry and render them accessible. Thus, information was kept from many senior citizens regarding various activities that could have helped them and improved their quality of life.
-  **Senior citizens in the community – use of digital means** – The Ministry of Social Affairs and Ministry for Social Equality acted to make digital means accessible to senior citizens, but they are in the initial stages of this activity. In the Ministry of Social Affairs estimation, the number of participants in the programs designated for this purpose is expected to be around 10,000 by the end of 2021.
-  **Use of digital means to maintain contact between institutional residents and their loved ones** – The Ministry of Health and Ministry of Social Affairs recognized the importance of preserving the residents' connection with their loved ones via digital means, mainly through remote visual communication, during the Covid-19 pandemic period, and even directed the institutions to act in the matter. However, holding such standards is not a condition for receiving a license to operate a geriatric hospital or an old-age home, and the ministries did not allocate funding from their budget to purchase or use them. Additionally, the ministries partially checked within the framework of their control process of the institutions (in the Ministry of Health in 54% of the control reports and the Ministry of Social Affairs in 27% of the reports) that they are indeed placing at the disposal of the residents the digital means for maintaining remote visual communication.
-  **Auxiliary healthcare workforce shortage in institutions** – Notwithstanding the shortage in auxiliary healthcare workers in the institutions, estimated at 2,500, with the problem being more severe during the Covid-19 pandemic, and despite the government's decision from July 2020 to bring from abroad up to 2,500 foreign workers, by July 2021, foreign auxiliary healthcare workers had not yet been brought to Israel to work at the institutions. It further emerged that by April 2021, the Geriatrics Division at the Ministry of Health, in coordination with the Ministry of Social Affairs, the National Insurance Institute, the Prime Minister's Office, and the Ministry of Finance, had not yet completed drawing up a program for expanding caregivers' functions, which according to the government's decision from May 2020, was supposed to have been submitted to the Health Ministry's Director-General in March 2021.

³ A framework that serves as a safety net for senior citizens residing in the community, which is provided in the senior citizen's home. The services included in the program are: an emergency call center and accompanying medical services, a community parent acting as an intermediary, social and cultural activities, providing access to services, etc.



Special support projects and programs sponsored by government ministries –

During the crisis, government ministries operated, in cooperation with third sector organizations, special support projects, and programs, among them: in March-April 2020, the Ministry of Social Affairs distributed over 6 million meals to the homes of 127 thousand senior citizens, with a budget investment of NIS 260 million, as well as distress buttons and fall sensors to some 18,000 senior citizens; in July 2020, amid the crisis, the Ministry of Social Affairs drew up, in collaboration with the Ministry for Social Equality and other bodies⁴, a national program for the protection of the third age population living in the community – the "Magen Zahav" (Gold Shield) program; additionally, the Ministry for Social Equality acted in a range of ways to assist the independent senior citizen, especially in the alleviation of loneliness and isolation, the entire exercise of rights and digital literacy. Concerning institutions, the State has acted on various aspects of the issue and invested resources in dealing with the pandemic in an attempt to continue providing the residents with appropriate care and maintain their life routine, as described in the State Comptroller's report from October 2020 on the topic "Caring for Senior Citizens Residing in Institutions during the Covid-19 pandemic – Interim Findings".

Key recommendations



Information on senior citizens at local authorities and in national and general databases – According to the Senior Citizens Law, the local authority must appoint a senior citizens adviser to serve as an integrator for the senior citizens' domain; and to be in charge of centralizing the information on this population, updating it in a routine time, and carrying out controls aimed at optimizing it, including the seniors' contact details; so that the local authority can make contact with them and assist them also in an emergency. It is recommended that the Ministry of Social Affairs and Ministry for Social Equality jointly draw up, in consultation with the Ministry of Justice – the Attorney General, a mechanism for setting up an online database, or any other effective mechanism, for obtaining information on senior citizens in a time of emergency. It is further recommended that the National Digital System in the Ministry of Economy complete the regulatory process for adding the digital communication details of public bodies, including the Population and Immigration Authority and the Central Bureau of Statistics, for contacting the residents; that the Population Authority examine additional ways to optimize the information in its possession in times of routine, so that it will be prepared for times of emergency as well; and that the Population Authority and Central

⁴ The Ministry of Health, National Emergency Authority, Ministry of Defense, National Insurance Institute, Digital Israel Headquarters, Ministry for Community Empowerment and Advancement, Ministry of Interior, Ministry of Aliyah and Integration, Ministry of Construction and Housing, local authorities, HMOs, civil societies and volunteer organizations.



Bureau of Statistics increase the cooperation between them, including the regulatory process this would require, reduce the discrepancies between their respective databases, to optimize the database to assist the entire population in Israel in a time of emergency, particularly the senior population. In addition, the Ministry of Social Affairs and Ministry for Social Equality should arrange for shared work mechanisms between the two ministries, at the same time determine the purview and boundaries of responsibility, to enable the pooling of resources and transparency of information between them, subject to the protection of senior citizens' privacy by law.



Alleviating the loneliness and isolation of senior citizens in the community – actions by the Ministry of Social Affairs and Ministry for Social Equality – It is recommended that the Ministry of Social Affairs complete reviewing the operation model for day centers, including the budgeting mechanism, to enable the continued provision of this vital service to senior citizens, in times of routine in general, and in times of emergency in particular, including the consolidation of solutions under a single roof and pooling of public resources. Likewise, the Ministry of Social Affairs should publicize nationally, inform all senior citizens about supportive communities, and assess the need to set up additional supportive communities, particularly in the 108 local authorities that lack such frameworks. In addition, the State Comptroller's Office recommends that the Ministry of Social Affairs and Ministry for Social Equality draw up an outline for sharing information, pooling resources, and coordinating between themselves and with the local authorities, concerning all the activities, solutions, and programs offered to senior citizens in the community. It is also recommended that the ministries focus their efforts on alleviating the loneliness and isolation of senior citizens, who have suffered severely from this, according to age bracket, sector, or another characteristic.



Senior citizens in the community – alleviating loneliness and isolation by digital means – It is recommended that the Ministry of Social Affairs and Ministry for Social Equality cooperate with the local authorities to map the senior citizens in need of assistance in the digital infrastructures field, and accordingly expand the services offered and considerably increase the number of seniors using them. Likewise, the ministries involved should examine options to develop digital means for senior citizens with low digital literacy, such as a dedicated TV channel for the senior population, in collaborations with existing operators.



Use of digital means to maintain contact between institutional residents and their loved ones – It is recommended that the Ministry of Health and Ministry of Social Affairs consider assimilating the use of digital means to allow remote visual communication between the residents and their loved ones on a routine basis, as an additional tier of face-to-face meetings, particularly in times when the possibility of such meeting is likely to be limited, like the outbreak of a pandemic, war or natural disaster. Regarding the assimilation, regulatory action is recommended in the framework of licenses for operating the institutions, budgeting these means, and carrying out current controls in all institutions.



Auxiliary healthcare workforce shortage in institutions – The Ministry of Health, Ministry of Social Affairs, Ministry of Finance, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Population and Immigration Authority, National Insurance Institute, and Prime Minister's Office should implement – each within its sphere of responsibility – the Government's decision from July 2020 to bring from abroad up to 2,500 foreign workers to work as auxiliary personnel in the institutions, and the Government's decision from May 2020 about increasing the supply of caregivers for senior citizens in the community and institutions. It is recommended that the Ministry of Health and Ministry of Social Affairs continue to monitor the workforce situation in the institutions and ensure that the required solution is being provided to the institutions in this respect.

The effects of Covid-19 pandemic on those aged 65 and over in Israel, September 2020



Source: Joint Israel Eshel and the ERI Institute (September 2020).



Summary

The Covid-19 pandemic put the senior citizens' population at the risk focus and public attention, necessitating governmental and municipal bodies and third sector organizations to swiftly help the elderly. Despite the importance of a reliable database on senior citizens, no single body in Israel centralizes primary data on this entire population, including seniors' identity and updated contact details, using an organized mechanism. The lack of a unified database made it difficult for local and central government representatives to assist senior citizens.

The State Comptroller's Office recommends that the Ministry of Social Affairs, Ministry for Social Equality, and when relevant, also the Ministry of Health, draw up an outline for sharing information, pooling resources, and coordinating among themselves and with the local authorities and institutions, concerning all the activities, solutions and programs being offered to senior citizens to alleviate their loneliness and isolation, and at the same time expand the services provided in the digital domain to significantly increase the number of seniors using them.

