



State Comptroller of Israel | Local Government Audit | 2021

Systemic Audit

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# **The Local Authorities Conduct During the COVID-19 Pandemic**





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## Background

On March 11, 2020, the World Health Organization declared the COVID-19 disease as a pandemic. The outbreak of the COVID-19 disease was first reported in Israel in late February 2020. Since the beginning of March 2020, the Ministry of Health has issued public guidelines that applied various restrictions to Israeli citizens, including quarantine and social distancing instructions to prevent infection, intended to eradicate COVID-19. These instructions have been found to have far-reaching effects both on the individual level and on the community level; both from the emotional-mental aspect and from the material-economic aspect. In a time of uncertainty, local authorities had an extremely important role to play – to serve as an anchor for the residents and the community – while continuing to provide the services required by the residents and to reduce negative consequences, to the extent possible.



## Key figures

**49%**

Of the sample local authorities did not prepare a reference scenario according to the "Procedure of the Local Authority's Preparedness for an Influenza Pandemic" which was distributed by the Israeli National Emergency Economy Headquarters in May 2007.

**NIS 2.7 billion**

State indemnification to local authorities designed to affect the scope and quality of the essential services they provide to their residents.

**91%**

Of the sample and audited local authorities distributed information to residents through social networks.

**45%**

Of all local authorities in Israel did not submit their enforcement data to the National Coronavirus Enforcement Authority of Israel.

**10%**

Of the 204 local authorities that reported to the Ministry of Labor, Social Affairs and Social Services on staffing positions of the welfare system staffed less than 70% of the positions, after the date of exclusion of all social workers.

**20%**

Increase in the number of referrals regarding children at risk (according to a survey conducted by the Organization of Welfare and Social Services Managers in Local Authorities in 171 local authorities).

**47%**


Of the sample local authorities that used databases to locate populations in need of assistance reported that they encountered difficulties in using the various databases.

**96%**





Of the sample local authorities were assisted by food distribution volunteers; 84% were assisted by volunteers to purchase food and medicine, and 73% to create interpersonal relationships with lonely individuals.



## Audit actions

-  The Office of the State Comptroller examined various aspects of the activity of local authorities during the COVID-19 Pandemic – especially during the first wave. The examination was conducted among ten local authorities (the examined local authorities); questionnaires were also distributed among 102 local authorities, selected according to a statistical sample, regarding their activity in times of emergency in the period between March and July 2020, and 85 of those local authorities responded to the questionnaire (sample local authorities); a public participation procedure was also conducted in two ways: the first, by questioning focus groups from among populations who were treated by the welfare system in the examined local authorities, and the second, through a survey conducted among a representative sample of 1,212 residents throughout Israel (public participation survey).

## Key findings

-  **Preparedness for an Emergency Scenario of an Influenza Pandemic** – 31% of the sample local authorities were familiar with the 2008 circular of the Director General of the Ministry of Interior under which local authorities are required to prepare an operating procedure according to the "Procedure of the Local Authority's Preparedness for an Influenza Pandemic" distributed by the Israeli National Emergency Economy Headquarters in May 2007, but did not prepare a procedure as required; 18% of the sample local authorities were not familiar with the circular of the Director General of the Ministry of Interior and did not prepare a procedure of preparedness for an influenza pandemic.
-  **Conducting Situation Assessments and Drawing Conclusions** – Only half of the sample local authorities fully documented the situation assessment meetings they conducted; three of the ten local authorities surveyed did not conduct or document a process of drawing conclusions at the end of the first wave, in order to map the aspects of their functioning that need to be preserved or improved.
-  **Central Government Guidelines** – 82% of the sample local authorities indicated that they had difficulty in implementing the central government guidelines due to numerous guidelines, and 56% of them indicated that there were conflicting guidelines.
-  **Residents' Positions Regarding the Local Authorities' Handling of the COVID-19 Pandemic** – The public participation survey shows that approximately 20% of the residents were very dissatisfied with the functioning of the local authorities, and



approximately 40% were partially satisfied with their functioning during the COVID-19 Pandemic; the reasons for lack of satisfaction differed respecting the local authorities.



**Enforcement Actions of the Local Authorities** – As opposed to fines amounting to approximately NIS 7.3 million issued by the examined local authorities, approximately NIS 1.3 million were collected by 1.12.20, which are 18% of the total fines imposed.



**Employment of Welfare Workers** – Even after the date of exclusion of all social workers (i.e., the date on which local authorities could employ them at a rate greater than the limited employment quota at the time), there were local authorities who chose not to staff the welfare worker positions in full – it arises from reports by 204 local authorities that 20% of them staffed no more than 85% of the positions specified in the organizational standards.



**Remote Work of Professional Care** – Local authorities that did not allow remote work had social workers and educational psychologists who were forced to take leave during the period of emergency, either because they could not get to work in the local authority offices, or because they chose not to come to the department (among other things due to their belonging to a risk group or fear of exposure to the virus); additionally, orderly methodologies and guidelines were not established for remote professional care.



**Use and Sharing of Information** – Local authorities encountered difficulties in using theirs and other bodies' databases (including databases of the National Insurance Institute of Israel, the Ministry of Health, the Ministry of Social Equality and the Ministry of Finance), for the purpose of locating populations in need of assistance: the databases were not immediately available for use, lacked details, included incorrect details, were set forth in various reporting formats and could not be consolidated until after they had been reprocessed, and with a lot of investment.



**Feeding Enterprise** – The social services departments were required to invest a significant portion of their resources, time and essential manpower in managing and implementing the feeding enterprise array – this came at the expense of the professional care that, during the crisis, was needed more than before for welfare populations and residents that required assistance.



**Returning to School** – In approximately 50% of cases (in kindergartens and up to 3<sup>rd</sup> grade and in 11<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup> grades), the dates for going back to school set by heads of local authorities were later than those provided in the order, mainly due to local authorities' difficulties in preparation for opening educational institutions in accordance with the guidelines.



**Cultural and Leisure Events for Residents of the Local Authority** – All the examined local authorities found alternative ways to hold events to boost the morale of the residents, in a variety of activities that complied with the various guidelines and regulations.

**Volunteer Assistance System** – The extensive volunteer activity organized by the local authorities, in collaboration with non-profit organizations, public organizations and business companies, is commended.

## Key recommendations

- 💡 It is recommended that the Ministry of Interior instruct all local authorities to conduct procedures for drawing conclusions at the end of each wave of morbidity and to report their results to the Ministry through its districts, so that the lessons learned will serve as an outline for action in emergencies and in case of further waves of morbidity, if any. It is recommended that the Ministry of Interior regulate the insurance aspect of the activities of local authorities in the field of epidemiological investigations, in cooperation with the responsible parties.
- 💡 In cases where local authorities encountered difficulty in enforcement within their jurisdiction, it is recommended that they increase cooperation with the Israel Police to ensure that nationwide enforcement is carried out according to equal criteria, thus helping to curb the spread of the pandemic.
- 💡 It is recommended that the National Coronavirus Enforcement Authority of Israel establish a nationwide, egalitarian enforcement policy, based also on the reports of local authorities and enforcement agencies, and accordingly guide the various enforcement agencies.
- 💡 It is recommended that local authorities prepare the necessary infrastructure that will ensure that their essential workers will be able to work remotely, and it is recommended that they examine the continued implementation of capabilities developed during the COVID-19 Pandemic even when returning to routine times.
- 💡 Given the importance of the work of welfare agents in general, and of social workers in particular, at a time of emergency, local authorities must act to continue their employment as usual, and if necessary, allow them to work remotely and during flexible hours.
- 💡 The Ministry of Labor, Social Affairs and Social Services, in collaboration with the local government, must develop orderly methodologies and guidelines that will include



treatment and monitoring methods while maintaining the privacy of patients, including regulation of the digitization procedures involved in remote professional care.



Due to the necessity to provide a response accessible to all special populations in need of assistance in times of emergency, it is recommended that the Ministry of Interior and local authorities, with the assistance of the Ministry of Justice, act to regulate local authorities' use of databases in government ministries and other public bodies, such as the National Insurance Institute of Israel and health maintenance organizations, in order to locate and map these populations online in accordance with the provisions of maintaining the law, including in the area of protection of privacy; it is recommended that the Ministry of Labor, Social Affairs and Social Services and the Ministry of Defense complete the establishment of a unified and up-to-date database for people with disabilities in accordance with the criteria to be determined and the legal provisions pertaining to the management of the database and joining it.



Under conditions of distance learning, it is not always possible to provide assistance in the student's home, and it is therefore recommended that all local authorities work to maintain learning centers for special education students who are integrated into the regular school system (by themselves or through educational institutions operating within the local authority's area), so that every integrated student has a supportive framework.



In times of emergency that cause mental and emotional difficulty, all local authorities must work to ensure that the Psychological-Educational Service (the PES) expands its circle of those receiving treatment. It is recommended that the Ministry of Education and the local authorities examine the need for dedicated budgeting for times of emergency, in order to enhance the activities of the PES and expand its clientele.



It is recommended that the Psychological Counseling Service (PCS) examine the various methodologies developed by some of the local authority PES regarding remote professional treatment and update its guidelines as needed among all PES, including guidelines regarding aspects of monitoring and maintaining patient confidentiality.



Given the pedagogical and social importance of group meetings, and in order to strengthen the mental resilience of students, it is recommended that local authorities encourage activities in local-area venues and assist in preparing such venues for the use of students and teaching staff.

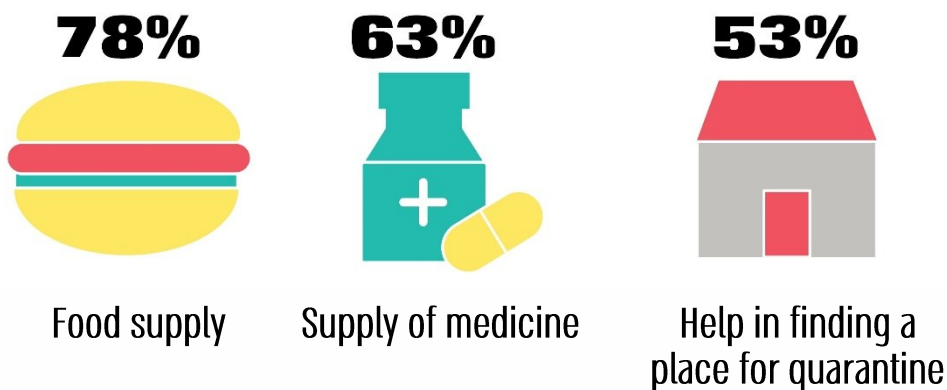


In view of the importance of operating childcare services in times of emergency for the children of vital workers, it is recommended that local authorities that have not activated such childcare services examine whether there is a demand for them and ensure their opening, and especially ensure the operation of frameworks designated for children of special education staff.





### The Sample local Authorities' Main Areas of Assistance to the Residents



According to the sample of local authorities, processed by the Office of the State Comptroller.

## Summary

Local authorities play a key role in times of emergency: they are committed to continued provision of essential services to residents, they carry out the national emergency policy, and they play a key role in its implementation processes. In view of the important role played by local authorities in managing the crisis and their contribution to maintaining the public's resilience, the central government must act to integrate local authority representatives in policy formulation and examine the expansion of the local authorities' administrative independence and flexibility, especially in times of emergency.

The Covid-19 pandemic highlighted the importance of social service and welfare activities required during emergencies, to ensure an appropriate response and assistance to needy elements in society. The pandemic delineated the contribution of the local authority's social and welfare staff in emergency preparedness. The local authorities should provide their social and welfare staff with all available means and options for coping with emergencies and successful resolution of difficulties encountered. This includes employing all the staff, ensuring them access to critical information, guaranteeing them availability of all needed equipment and resources and developing the methodology for remote communication.



In the educational sphere, the local authorities encountered difficulty in coping with numerous directives coupled with frequent changes. Sometimes they did not comply with the directives as necessary. It is recommended that the Ministry of Education and the local authorities perform an evaluation to pinpoint deficiencies and impediments to facilitate the return of students to the 2020-21 school year. Additionally it is recommended that the Ministry of Education undertake all necessary actions to consolidate its directives and instructions to the local authorities and distribute them in advance.