



State Comptroller of Israel | Local Government Audit
Report | July 2024

Social Audit

Parent-Child Contact Centers in the Local Authorities



Parent-Child Contact Centers in the Local Authorities

Background

The Convention on the Rights of the Child stipulates that a child separated from one or both parents is entitled to maintain personal relationships and direct contact with both parents regularly unless it is against the child's best interests¹. When a parent has difficulty maintaining an appropriate relationship with their child, yet such a relationship is essential for the child's normal development, welfare authorities should preserve the relationship and are responsible for providing a protected environment supervised by professionals.

Parent-Child Contact Centers (Contact Centers) offer a safe setting for facilitating meetings between parents and children amid separation, divorce, or violence instances and risk. Their objective is to implement a therapeutic intervention program that supports a gradual transition, aligning with the needs of both parents and children, from structured visits in the Center to independent living arrangements. Contact Centers are operated by local authorities, which function as the executive arm of the central government to provide personal welfare services.

¹ Convention on the Rights of the Child, G.A. res. 44/25, annex, 44 U.N. GAOR Supp. (No. 49) at 167, U.N. Doc. A/44/49 (1989)



Key Figures

66

Contact Centers were distributed across 64 local authorities in 2023, serving about 6.3 million residents. These centers function as regional hubs. Around one-third of the treated families in 2022 resided in other local authorities

**about
2,500**

families, with about 4,200 children, were treated in 2022 in 62 Contact Centers. 85% under a judicial order. Around 65% required full supervision during the visit

**NIS 9.8
million**

the Ministry of Welfare's budget for 75% of the workforce expenses – social workers, support workers, and security personnel, in all Contact Centers in 2022

only 9%

of the non-Jewish authorities, as of 2023, established Contact Centers, compared to 32% of Jewish authorities

**about
15%**

of the families in each of 2020–2022 were treated for over two years by the Contact Centers. 111 families had to wait to have treatment at the Contact Center in 2023

**about one
third**

of the respondents to a satisfaction questionnaire among parents who visit the Contact Centers were not satisfied with the location and accessibility of the Contact Center

75%


of the Contact Centers' social workers stated in the questionnaire that treatment training for unique populations is needed. 27% stated that training is needed to treat Arab and Ethiopian communities

over half

of the Contact Centers' social workers stated in the questionnaire that they experienced violence in 2021–2023. 35% of the incidents were reported to the police, 17% to the Ministry of Welfare No Violence Committee




Audit Actions

 From May to November 2023, the State Comptroller's Office audited the operation of Contact Centers across local authorities. An in-depth audit was performed at Contact Centers in the municipalities of **Beitar Illit, Dimona, Lod, Nazareth, and Tel Aviv-Jaffa**, and at the **Nahal Sorek** regional council and the Ministry of Welfare, including the Children and Youth Complaints Commission for Out-of-Home Placement. Additional examinations were conducted at the Contact Center in **Kfar Sava**, the municipalities of **Petah Tikvah and Ramla**, and the local authorities of **Tamra and Ilut**.


As part of the audit, a questionnaire was distributed to social workers across 59 of the 66 Contact Centers operating during the audit period in 64 local authorities² (the Contact Center Social Workers Questionnaire), and another questionnaire was sent to 280 parents who met with their children at Contact Centers during the audit (Satisfaction Questionnaire). The audit also conducted 15 in-depth interviews with parents who met with their children during or close to the audit period at Contact Centers in the municipalities of **Beer Sheva, Beit Shean, Bnei Brak, Haifa, Tiberias, Nazareth, Nesher, Afula, Kiryat Gat, Rosh Ha'ain, Shfar'am, and Tel Aviv-Jaffa**, as well as in the **Menashe** regional council. The interviewees were selected based on gender, the Contact Center location, and the population to which they belong³.

Key Findings



 **Establishing Contact Centers** – according to the Social Workers' Regulations, most of the Centers (43 out of 49) whose Social Workers responded to the Contact Center Social Workers Questionnaire, operate less than 20 hours weekly. Consequently, these Centers treat a limited number of families, and 29 Centers will serve ten families or less in 2023. This figure may indicate challenges in adhering to the Ministry of Welfare's standards for establishing larger Contact Centers to serve broader regions and the prevalent practice of deploying Contact Centers nationwide that manage a few families within limited operating hours.




 **Waiting Times** – in 26 of the 59 Contact Centers whose Social Workers responded to the questionnaire, 111 families waited for treatment from two weeks to over 30 weeks.


² There are three Contact Centers in Jerusalem: for the general population, the ultra-Orthodox population and the Arab population.


³ The interviews were carried out with the help of an external company whose field of expertise is public participation procedures.




For instance, in **Nesher**, families wait over 30 weeks before beginning meetings at the Contact Center. A father from **Petah Tikvah** and his children, who in 2022 were with their mother in a Jerusalem shelter for women victims of violence, waited about eight months to meet at the **Beitar Illit** Contact Center, located 70 km from the father's residence, due to a lack of available meeting places in closer facilities throughout the entire period.

 **Partial Regional Response** – about one-third (90 out of 280) of the Satisfaction Questionnaire respondents expressed dissatisfaction with the location and accessibility of their Contact Center. The audit raised that the regional response does not fully fulfill its purpose, as families are treated based on available space. Additionally, some in-depth audited Centers, such as in **Lod**, **Nahal Sorek**, and **Tel Aviv**, prioritize local authority residents. There was also concern that the centers were not established according to prior and informed planning, based on needs assessment, but instead according to specific local authorities' willingness to cover a center's operational costs.

 **Budgeting** – the Ministry of Welfare allocates a tariff of about NIS 650 per month per treated family based on the Center's social workers, support staff, and security personnel costs. The local authority operating the Center budgets the operating expenses, such as rent and building maintenance, procurement of furniture and equipment required according to the Social Workers' Regulations, or hiring more experienced staff than set by the model. The Ministry of Welfare's budgeting mechanism for Contact Centers does not allow the local authorities to cover over 25% of the budget, discourages local authorities from establishing Contact Centers in a layout that would prevent families from waiting for available meeting spaces or holding meetings in locations that are excessively distant from their homes.

 **Physical Structure and Equipment** – out of the 59 Contact Centers' social workers who responded to the questionnaire, 13 Centers' social workers responded that their Center's physical environment does not respect the families' dignity; the level of crowding in the Contact Center is excessively high, rendering it unsuitable for individual treatments, families seeking privacy, families with special needs, or families with multiple children. For example, the Contact Center in **Lod** has two crowded rooms, each measuring no more than 6 square meters. Additionally, some Centers lack facilities such as waiting areas, yards, or restrooms. Centers in **Kfar Sava** and **Holon** doubling as kindergartens further complicate access for teenagers seeking private meetings with their parents. Furthermore, the provisions in the Social Workers' Regulations concerning Contact Centers have not been revised since 2009, over 14 years before the audit date, resulting in recommended equipment lists that include outdated technology, such as video and fax machines, which are largely obsolete in most of Contact Centers as of the audit date.

 **Treatment Continuum** – the responses of the Contact Center's social workers raised a necessity for collaboration with an extensive array of care providers within the local



authority. In some authorities, the supportive response that can accompany the continuation of family care is limited to the family social worker, who may not always be available to accompany the family post-meetings at the Contact Center. The challenge of delivering a comprehensive and supportive treatment environment is exacerbated when the parents meeting their children at the Contact Center reside outside the local authority of the Center. Responses indicate that social workers referring families for treatment at the Contact Center emphasize the importance of cooperation among social services departments, especially within programs improving parent-child relationships, including the Parent and Child Center, "Pathways to Parenting," the Family Treatment Unit, and the Otzma Center. Additionally, in specific cases, collaboration is necessary with social workers specializing in addiction and domestic violence.





Families Treated for Over Two Years – although treatment at the Contact Center is intended to last about six months, data from the Ministry of Welfare indicates that between 2020 and 2022, about 15% of families at the Contact Center underwent treatment for over two years. According to the Contact Center Social Workers Questionnaire, from the 59 Centers that responded, 251 families received treatment for over two years: 21 families in **Beer Sheva**, 20 families in **Bnei Brak**, 17 families in **Or Yehuda**, 15 families in **Tel Aviv-Jaffa**, 13 in **Haifa**, and nine families in **Beit Shemesh**.

Successful Treatment Completion – in 2022, less than half of the families who completed treatment (598 families) transitioned to independent visitation arrangements. Alongside the decrease in families moving to independent arrangements, there was an increase in families returning for treatment at the Contact Center post-sessions, with 206 families returning in 2022 compared to 147 in 2020.

Violence in Contact Centers – in the responses to the Contact Center Social Workers Questionnaire, in about half of the Centers' their social workers (30 out of 59) experienced violence as part of their duties from 2021 to 2023. 35% of these instances were reported to the police, whereas only 17% were reported to the No Violence Committee at the Ministry of Welfare. Additionally, 17 of the Contact Centers lacked emergency buttons, as the Social Workers Regulations mandated. Moreover, 20% of the social workers reported incidents of violence from parents towards children during meetings in 2021–2023. Police involvement occurred in only seven of the 22 cases (31%) where violence was reported; in other instances, meetings were suspended, and incidents were reported to the referring social worker, with some parents being temporarily barred from the Contact Center.

Implementation of Judicial Decisions – responses to the Contact Center's Social Workers Questionnaire raised that in over half, (31 out of 58) their social workers experienced challenges in executing judicial decisions, often due to a lack of practical means to fulfill the orders or difficulties encountered by parents in adhering to court-mandated requirements.



-  **Training for the Treating Social Workers** – in 2022, in 15 of the Contact Centers, social workers were not accompanied by instructors during their work. Among the 47 Centers where instruction was held, 14 were performed by unqualified instructors. 17 Centers performed no instruction in 2021.
-  **The Social Workers Burden** – data from the Ministry of Welfare raised that across all four districts, the ratio of families treated to staff members at Contact Centers exceeded the set standard (an average of 48 families treated compared to a standard of 23). Consequently, social workers, alongside their regular responsibilities, cannot often provide comprehensive support to families seeking assistance. According to the Contact Center's Social Workers Questionnaire, 75% experienced emotional stress related to their work, yet only 66% reported receiving adequate support from local authorities regarding this stress.
-  **Management of the Information on the Families Treated** – it was raised that **Beitar Illit, Dimona, Lod, Nazareth, Tel Aviv-Jaffa**, and **Nahal Sorek** do not manage sensitive information concerning families in a systematic, unified manner using computerized and secure systems. Thus, in **Beitar Illit, Dimona, Nazareth, and Tel Aviv-Jaffa**, files are often managed physically, while in **Nahal Sorek** and **Lod**, the files are managed on a computer. Still, information is not fully managed in a computerized system, which makes it impossible to manage information that also concerns residents of other municipalities and, in any event, also enables sharing it.
-  **Personnel Recruitment** – the Contact Centers in **Arad, Kiryat Malachi**, and **Ramla** were shut down in 2021 due to personnel shortages. **Taiba's** Center was closed for some months in 2023 because personnel transitions and maternity leaves interrupted care for several families.









Service During the Swords of Iron War – despite the challenging circumstances of the Swords of Iron War, Contact Centers in **Beitar Illit, Dimona, Lod, Nazareth**, and **Tel Aviv-Jaffa** successfully operated already at the onset of the conflict, providing essential services to the families in need.

Pooling of Resources – the State Comptroller's Office commends the effective management of resources by the Department of Social Services in **Nahal Sorek**. This includes utilizing parent-child center facilities replicating a homelike environment with a therapeutic environment, featuring a living room corner and a fully equipped kitchen, benefiting families served by the Contact Centers.



Key Recommendations

-  It is recommended that the Ministry of Welfare consider changing the existing policy for the geographical distribution of Contact Centers according to needs, including the funding mechanism for Contact Centers, to incentivize local authorities to establish Contact Centers in a broad geographical distribution that will make treatment accessible to all families in need across the country.
-  It is recommended that local authorities operating parent-child centers in addition to Contact Centers work, where appropriate, pool resources, as done in **Nahal Sorek**, and ensure that Contact Centers utilize, where possible, the facilities of the parent-child centers. It is further recommended that the Ministry of Welfare update the equipment for operating a Contact Center according to current needs and inventory.
-  It is recommended that representatives of the regional offices of the Ministry of Welfare hold regular meetings with the Courts Administration and the Religious Courts Administration to expose them to the time constraints and limitations Contact Centers faces in conducting meetings between parents and their children. It is also recommended that the content regarding Contact Centers and the populations treated therein be included in training sessions for Family Court judges and judges in religious and Sharia courts so that the courts will be aware of the limitations of Contact Centers.
-  It is recommended that the Ministry of Welfare reduce the waiting times for families to begin treatment at Contact Centers, for example, by increasing personnel in busy Contact Centers and aggregating data on families waiting and waiting times at each center so that it can regulate the loads and prevent situations where families wait for months to begin meetings at the Contact Center. Additionally, the Ministry of Welfare should expand the treatment services provided to families at the Contact Center and accompany them through parental guidance and development of parenting skills within the Contact Center and in follow-up frameworks so more families succeed in leaving the Contact Center and conduct independent meetings in the community – which is the primary goal of the Contact Center.
-  In utilizing regional services, the Ministry of Welfare should establish a computerized data management infrastructure in which information about the family being treated at a Contact Center in a local authority where they do not reside will be managed and shared. It is recommended that the Ministry of Welfare regulate a clear and mandatory procedure for transferring information on treatment conducted at the Contact Center from the authority to which the treated family was referred to the local authority in which they reside and which manages their family file.
-  Given the population visiting Contact Centers and the numerous cases of violence occurring therein, it is recommended that the Ministry of Welfare connect Contact Centers to the National Protective Unit for Social Workers in local authorities to provide Contact Centers' workers with as comprehensive and extensive professional protection as possible.



Given the significant importance of holding regular and ongoing guidance meetings for the mental resilience of social workers in Contact Centers, it is recommended that the social services departments in local authorities, including the social services departments in **Hadera, Nof HaGalil, and Safed**, hold regular guidance meetings at Contact Centers. The Ministry of Welfare, through regional supervision, should monitor the execution of these meetings.



Distribution of Contact Centers Where Families are Required to Wait to Receive Treatment



Data from the Office of the State Comptroller questionnaire, state borders layer (unofficial) from Survey of Israel, processed by the Office of the State Comptroller (including adding layers).



Quotes from Interviews Conducted with Non-Custodial Parents at the Contact Centers



"I have to divide between the eldest, youngest, and middle; each one wants its attention. The youngest clings to me and prevents me from treating the other two equally. An hour once a week – **what father and mother can meet their children for an hour once a week?**"

"There was a decision to give me two hours at a contact center... in the welfare committee, there was a decision that there would be two hours, the court also made such a decision, but the social worker said that two hours was difficult for him... **he did not agree to give me two hours. He said he wasn't ready.**"

"There is nothing in the north, Afula – **no place was available for months ahead. Afula is also a 45-minute drive, Migdal Ha'emek and Tiberias – these are the only ones; there are no other contact centers in the entire north.** The congestion and lack of flexibility make it difficult... The social worker is looking for centers in the area, which are not many, that are available in the near future and can best suit the needs of the children and the parents. **Most contact centers have waiting periods.**"

"I know they are busy. I don't see it all the time; I come once every two weeks. **There can be a week when everyone comes, and there are no rooms.** It's very disturbing. **You can't be with the children and must wait.**"

"**They close at 4:00 p.m.** It's work time; I would sacrifice work for the meeting. **It puts the workplace at risk.**"

"I was angry that there was no accessibility there. **My mother had not met the children for several years. She is an old woman; I wanted to bring her at least to their birthdays – there is no elevator and it is not accessible...** worst of all – is accessibility, how come there is no accessibility in a place like this? This is a failure.. My mother gets around on a walker and can't climb 15–20 stairs, it's not pleasant.

Q: When you suggested this, didn't they recommend that you meet at another center that has accessibility?

A: **There is no other center. There is nothing else.**"

"Employee training is critical here. **Knowledge, study. On the subject of parental alienation, judges do not know how to deal with it.** Not even social workers know how to respond to this phenomenon. Until professionals learn how to stop this phenomenon, they will not know that nothing is to be done."



Summary

The audit raised that the 66 Contact Centers that operated in 2023 in local authorities across the country had difficulty providing an available and accessible response to the families requiring their care, and many needed to wait, sometimes for many months, before receiving assistance in strengthening the relationship between parents and their children. It was found that the budgeting mechanism established by the Ministry of Welfare, a mechanism that includes participation in the salary of the Contact Center employees only and allows the local authority that operates the Center to finance the rest of the costs involved (such as renting a building and its maintenance, purchasing furniture and equipment or hiring more staff than established as the primary workforce), has difficulty incentivizing local authorities to establish Contact Centers. As of the audit, the establishment of the centers is based mainly on the willingness of local authorities to bear the costs involved in operating a center and not on pre-informed planning based on an examination of needs.

It is recommended that the Ministry of Welfare consider comprehensively analyzing the needs of all local authorities in the services of the Contact Centers and also examine the correlation between these needs and the current geographical distribution of the Centers; based on this examination, it is recommended that the Ministry establish standards regarding the maximum loads and the maximum distances that families must travel to reach the Contact Center and expand the activity of the centers in the places required for this. It is further recommended that the Ministry of Welfare examine, in cooperation with the local authorities, the budgeting mechanism of the Contact Centers, including its effect on the desired correlation between the needs and the geographical distribution of the centers. It is also recommended that the Ministry of Welfare and the local authorities improve the conditions in which the Contact Centers operate and strengthen cooperation between the welfare frameworks in the local authority and between the various local authorities to provide the family members with comprehensive care that will help them exercise their right to maintain contact between the child's two parents. It is further recommended that the Ministry of Welfare find an operating model that balances the need to provide care adapted to the needs of each family and the need to operate a service that makes efficient use of resources, reduces the burden on the centers, and ensures that they are accessible and available.

It is recommended that the Ministry of Welfare and the local authorities rectify all the deficiencies noted in the report to improve the operation of the Contact Centers and the response to the treated families.

