

Personal Social Services*

Introduction

The personal social services are an important element in the array of services that the welfare state provides. The personal services respond to the needs and treat the problems of individuals, households, groups, and communities that cannot or that find it difficult to cope with various kinds of distress that severely affect their functioning and their life quality and impede their social integration.

The population groups whose needs and problems are of concern to the personal social services include children at risk, teenagers in distress, battered women, families in crises, the disabled, the mentally retarded, recent immigrants with adjustment difficulties, released prisoners, the elderly, the disabled, the retarded and drug addicts.

Service organizations in this arena provide a wide variety of types of assistance: counseling, care, information, mediation, instruction at the personal, household, and group levels, and nonfinancial material aid. These organizations also develop and run a variety of community and institutional services such as institutions, clubs and day centers for the elderly, hostels and community housing for the retarded and the disabled, shelters

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for girls in distress and battered women, day and afternoon centers for children, rehabilitation centers for the disabled, family counseling centers, and alcohol and drug treatment centers.

Thus, Israel's personal social services focus on the weakest and most vulnerable population groups in society. Their main challenges are to make meaningful contact with population groups in need, to provide them with services tailored to their needs, and to help them extricate themselves from their states of distress and poverty. The recommendations presented in detail below are meant to help craft an array of personal social services that can meet these challenges and help ease the plight of Israel's distressed population groups.

1. Anchoring the Personal Welfare Services in a Legal Infrastructure

The personal social services should be anchored in a Personal Welfare Services Law, which would establish, explicitly, the state's duty to provide "service baskets" for distressed population groups that fall into the purview of the personal social services (children and youth at risk, families in distress, the disabled elderly, the handicapped, and the mentally retarded).

The services included in the "basket" would be funded from the State budget and delivered by municipal welfare departments and nongovernmental organizations. The specific list of services offered in each service domain would be set forth by professional committees, with feedback from the public.

In Israel's history, the Knesset has passed many social laws that have guided the modus operandi of the personal social services and their professional staff. These laws cover a wide range of fields, such as at-home care for disabled elderly who cannot independently perform various activities in daily living,

care for children at risk, assistance for battered women, care for the retarded and disabled, protection of tenants of hostels, and care for youth at risk of deterioration. However, these laws (apart from the Long-Term Care Insurance Law) are protective statutes that, while stipulating the provision of assistance to those in need (children at risk, battered women, etc.), do not spell out the specific services to which these population groups are entitled and explain when they are to be allocated.

These services should include, but should not be limited to, assistance for children and teenagers at risk, hostel arrangements for the retarded and the disabled, community services for the disabled and the retarded, miscellaneous kinds of assistance for the needy (transport to medical care, allocation of basic furniture, home renovations, etc.), care for drug and alcohol addicts, and community work in disadvantaged neighborhoods.

There are several important reasons for securing the personal social services in a legal infrastructure:

First, laws reflect and stress the state's acknowledgment of the necessity to address special needs of various population groups and to undertake to respond to them appropriately and permanently.

Second, laws guarantee the delivery of crucial services for individuals in need on a standard and equal basis, irrespective of clients' place of residence and sociocultural affiliation. In the absence of an appropriate infrastructure of laws, the delivery of these services depends on national and local conditions that are not assured, such as availability of resources, political support, administrative and professional decisions, and consumer pressure. Thus, a statutory infrastructure is a precondition for successful allocation of vital services for people in distress without arbitrary administrative behavior, disparities among localities, irregularities, instability, and inequality over time.

Third, the existence and transparency of laws helps families and groups in distress acknowledge and disclose their needs; it legitimizes and even encourages them to turn to service organizations for assistance that may ease their plight.

Furthermore, the existence of laws that stipulate the allocation of services strengthens the awareness that one who accepts social services is exercising a basic social entitlement, not receiving charity. According to many testimonies, the social services that deal with population groups such as children and teenagers in distress reach only a small portion of their potential clientele. In contrast, long-term care services for the elderly, which are anchored in a legal infrastructure, reach a majority of the population in need and provide them with services that enhance the quality of their lives.

For this reason, the existence of laws that stipulate the allocation of a basic “basket” of services for population groups in need may help the social services tackle one of their most important challenges: making permanent and meaningful contact with population groups in distress who reside on the fringes of society. “Baskets” of services are meant not to replace existing laws but to augment them.

2. Redivision of Labor between Central and Municipal Government

The current division of labor between central and municipal government should be revised. Central government should concentrate on setting overall policy; gathering information on the social needs of various population groups; setting compulsory national standards for the extent, level, and quality of services (these standards should be reflected in the “baskets” of services); funding the services in the “basket”; encouraging research; providing assistance in personnel training; initiating specific projects; and giving focused assistance to localities that have a preponderance of different kinds of distress. Municipal authorities should focus on providing the services stipulated (directly or by means of other organizations), systematically gathering information on the needs of the local population, initiating and developing additional services that will meet specific

local needs, encouraging local organizations (NPOs and businesses) to participate in service delivery, and enhancing the local population's awareness of the services available.

Today, municipal authorities are the main players in delivering social services to the population. Most of the funding is provided by central government, which covers 75 percent of municipal authorities' welfare budgets; municipal authorities are supposed to fund the remainder from their own resources and from Interior Ministry grants. Municipal social-service budgets are not global; they are itemized in detail, including main and secondary lines. Authorities must operate in accordance with the budget lines and may not transfer funds from one line to another. Authorities that overspend their budgets in any line must cover the overrun from their own sources.

This method of budgeting and supervision gives the regulatory and control echelons of central government a great deal of control over municipal social-service activities, especially in fields that are budgeted by the state. However, municipal authorities are allowed to augment the compulsory quota of funding for social services by pledging additional resources of their own. Indeed, their participation has exceeded 25 percent, and the extent of the overrun has been growing in recent years.

Central government derives its vast influence not only from its cardinal role in funding but also from its responsibility for implementing laws that dictate the relevant authorities' *modus operandi* in special fields, such as protection of children at risk and prevention of family violence. The government also appoints the officials in charge of implementing the laws, supervises their actions, and steers municipal authorities' actions by invoking the provisions of the social-work regulations. Therefore, according to the existing division of labor, municipal authorities are responsible for providing a wide spectrum of services for population groups in need but seem to lack the control to determine the contours of many of these services and also lack, in greater part, the resources needed to allocate them

to the population. In contrast, central government is in charge of allocating most resources for these services and dictates many patterns of professional and administrative action at the municipal welfare departments, without responsibility for the delivery of service.

The effects of this division of labor on the scope and quality of service to the population has not been examined thoroughly thus far. However, study of various data and talks with national and municipal social-service officials point to several initial conclusions:

- a. Relations between central and municipal government are rather obtuse. On the one hand, the central government occasionally proclaims its ambition to give the municipal authorities greater independence but does little to back this approach with concrete measures. On the other hand, municipal authorities and other community players that attempt to develop specific community programs occasionally run into difficulties when they attempt to mobilize the government support that they need to finance the programs.
- b. Central-government officials argue that government support of municipal welfare budgets is based on standard criteria that aim to assure equitable allocation of resources. However, the extent of support appears to be affected by additional factors such as political and professional relations between municipal- and central-government players, municipal pressure on the central government, and allocation patterns that have formed over the years. Under the influence of these factors, disparities have taken shape in government assistance for municipal social-service budgets and, consequently, in the extent and quality of services delivered. These disparities have actually been widening because various factors – municipal leaders' attitudes toward social services, municipal authorities' economic strength and ability to raise financial resources, and the status, influence, and enterprise of municipal welfare departments and other local players – have

led to different levels of municipal funding for social-service budgets.

Thus, today's arrangements in dividing the labor between central and municipal government are replete with problems that affect the performance of municipal welfare departments. We recommend that the division of labor between central and municipal government be defined clearly and that municipal authorities be given greater autonomy. This recommendation rests on several basic premises:

- a. Municipal autonomy reflects the community perspective, which regards the local community as the setting best suited to appropriate responses to inhabitants' needs.
- b. Municipal autonomy gives appropriate expression to the fact that, even today, many municipal authorities carry a large share of the expenditure burden for their social services.
- c. The municipal welfare department, due to its location, experience, and proximity to the population, is probably more familiar than the central government with the special needs and conditions of the locality's population. Accordingly, it can develop services, choose priorities, and stipulate patterns of action that will correspond to these needs.
- d. Many municipal departments and other local organizations have developed talented professional leadership and skilled teams of workers that are both capable of and interested in assuming responsibility for the development of local services at an appropriate level and quality.
- e. Reducing the dependency of municipal authorities on central government in matters of social services may encourage the authorities to display greater responsibility and use their resources more efficiently.
- f. Greater autonomy may help municipal departments to develop strong cooperative relations with other community players (volunteer entities such as consumer organizations, businesses, informal support networks, and so on) in order to make their financial and human resources available for the

development of social-service programs, and to coordinate their activities in the community.

3. Extricating Populations in Distress from Their Plight

The social services, at both the national and the local levels, should make a special effort to deal with population groups in profound economic and social distress and to lift them out of their dire circumstances. The services can contribute to this effort in two ways: by implementing on a countrywide scale local social projects that have been introduced in various places in recent years and showed positive results, and by initiating and activating new programs.

All the social services, including the personal services, must make it a major challenge to identify individuals and households in severe distress, establish meaningful relations with them, and help them. We are referring to individuals and households that cannot cope on their own with a combination of hardships such as low income, poor health, protracted unemployment, poor schooling, and poor housing conditions (overcrowding, unsound housing, and lack of basic appliances).

Even today, there is a pool of programs and projects that aim to help individuals and households in distress, and some have proven their efficacy. Unfortunately, these programs are offered on a limited scale and in a small number of localities. Several of these programs are noteworthy:

- *Yahdav* – a long-term program that focuses on women in households with multiple problems and aims to reinforce clients and give them tools to cope with their situation.
- *Dror* – a support program for young households at risk of sliding into distress. These households are offered various types of assistance such as advisory service, information, various kinds of training, contacting various services and mediating between them and clients, and practical assistance.
- *Neighborhood assistance centers* – these centers, situated in disadvantaged neighborhoods, offer the population in need a

wide variety of services including counseling, information about entitlements and ways to exercise them, mediation and contact with other services, and practical assistance.

- *Youth assistance centers* – centers that provide a variety of caregiving, advisory, and mediation services for youth in distress.
- *Special programs to reinforce parental abilities* – such as *Ha-ken, Orion, and Family Caregivers*.
- *Paraprofessional tutors* – non-professionals, many of whom live in areas of distress and are familiar with conditions there. These workers use their unique knowledge to discharge various functions in making direct contact with households, giving parental training, providing information about entitlement, escorting clients to services, etc.

These programs share several typical features: direct, supportive, and close relations with individuals and households; allocation of a variety of services corresponding to clients' special needs; and an effort to equip clients with tools that enhance their ability to cope on their own. As stated, today these programs are available at a limited extent and in few localities. They should be offered on a wider scale, and encouragement should be provided for the initiation and development of additional programs that aim to make a meaningful improvement in the quality of life of population groups in distress.

4. Use of Social Services and Takeup of Entitlements by Those in Need

Initiatives are needed to assure the use of services and full takeup of entitlements by those in need of social services anchored in laws and regulations.

This recommendation stresses an issue noted in the discussion of the previous recommendation – the takeup of entitlements – because of its special importance. Israel has created a well-equipped package of in-kind and in-cash services

in fields such as of income maintenance, housing, health, education, immigrant integration, and personal social services. However, there is evidence that many people in need of assistance from the social services do not contact them and, therefore, can neither exercise their entitlements nor obtain needed assistance. For example, the Ministry of Labor and Social Affairs reports that only a small proportion of children in distress receive relevant services from municipal welfare departments. According to the State Comptroller's report for 1995, service agencies tasked with assisting youth in distress have established only partial relations with this population group.

Additional evidence shows that only a small fraction of assaults against children and women are brought to the knowledge of, and treated appropriately by, the relevant authorities. Thus, the failure to contact service agencies may have highly inauspicious results. Reporting in these matters is incomplete, pointing to the need to gather systematic information about the rate of takeup of entitlements and use of services by population groups in need.

Citizens seem to refrain from using services and exercising their entitlements for several reasons, e.g., lack of knowledge about entitlements under laws and regulations, ignorance of services to which they are entitled, a lack of effort on the part of some service organizations to inform citizens about the services they provide, non-availability of services in certain localities (in general or at most hours of the day), and difficulties in communication between service organizations and citizens, prompted by cultural gaps, language problems, and similar factors.

Notably, the high level of takeup of entitlements and use of services provided under the Long-Term Care Insurance Law may point to several factors that can help improve takeup of other services: anchoring of entitlements in clear and binding legislation, provision of information to the public about these entitlements and services, countrywide deployment of

organizations that plan and deliver the services, and placement of service and assistance centers in areas of distress.

5. Partial Privatization of Social Services

The partial privatization processes in the social services should be improved and systematically monitored, and service providers' activities should be placed under tougher public control.

A process of partial privatization has been taking place in Israel for some time, manifested in the transfer of responsibility for delivery of social services to nongovernmental organizations (NPOs and businesses) and continued governmental responsibility for funding, steering, and control of delivery. By now, most personal social services are being provided by NGOs. However, since this process has not been accompanied by systematic examination and monitoring, it is difficult for the time being to evaluate its results clearly, in terms of the quality and level of service to the consumer and in terms of organizational and economic efficiency.

Partial privatization aims (1) to realize several advantages of the "market economy," such as competition among organizations, delivery of services at lower cost, the possibility of consumer choice, and less bureaucracy, and (2) to mitigate several risks associated with this economy, such as harm to the allocation of services for weak population groups and a decline in service quality because the profit consideration commands the highest priority. However, the advocates of privatization, while admitting that the partial privatization is allowing NGOs to become more active, claim that this activity is being circumscribed by numerous constraints and limitations that make the NGOs less able to bring their unique strengths to full fruition. The opponents of privatization, in contrast, express the fear that partial privatization, in which consumers obtain many social services from NGOs and, thereby, sever their relationship

with government authorities, is the first step down a path meant to prepare the public consciousness for full privatization.

Thus, the acceleration of the privatization process may present the personal social services with many opportunities, such as the possibility of consumer choice, superior quality and efficiency in delivery of services, cost-cutting, and greater willingness to respond to consumer demands. However, this process also contains the possibility of risks: erosion of the state's commitment to citizens' social entitlements, detriment to citizens of limited means who have no real ability to choose, creation of disparities among services provided to different population groups, formation of separate services for population groups differentiated by economic situation, vitiation of social solidarity and integration, and erosion of public control of the social services' activities.

Consequently, in view of the numerous opportunities and risks associated with the partial privatization process, great caution and more systematic monitoring are needed.

6. Consumer Involvement

Consumer involvement in various personal social service activities should be encouraged. This involvement should be reflected in the creation of permanent mechanisms that will allow consumers to become partners – as individuals and in volunteer consumer organizations (which operate today in most fields of service) – in the policymaking process, initiating and developing various programs, and monitoring the services' activity. These mechanisms should be established at both the national and the municipal levels.

One of the characteristic developments in Israeli society in recent years is an uptrend in consumer involvement in policymaking and determining the modus operandi of social-service organizations. This development is visible in various respects, such as growing involvement of parents in schools, the establishment of a countrywide organization of health-service

consumers, the coalescence of residents' organizations in urban neighborhoods, and actions taken by households in housing distress. These developments correspond to the trend of consumer empowerment and allow consumers to influence the action patterns of the social services not only as individuals who express their personal needs but also in the form of groups and organizations that represent the interests of population groups with shared needs.

Manifestations of this trend in the personal social services are quite limited; consumers of these services have not been organizing extensively to influence their activity. Similarly, municipal welfare departments and other social-service organizations have made few efforts to encourage consumers to get involved. The Municipal Welfare Council established by the Municipality of Tel Aviv, and councils of pensioners established in several localities, are exceptions to the rule. Even in these cases, there is not enough evidence about their activities. The relevant population groups also gain little from the activity of political lobbies on their behalf. Therefore, a higher level of consumer involvement is a challenge that most of the personal social services have not yet had to face.

7. Significant Improvement in Social Services in the Arab Sector

To narrow the perceptible disparities between the Jewish sector and the Arab sector in terms of social services, the Arab sector should be given much greater assistance.

There is clear statistical evidence of the existence of large gaps between the Jewish sector and the Arab sector in financial assistance from the central government.

Although, as noted above, there are also disparities in government assistance to various Jewish localities, these gaps are immeasurably smaller than those between the Jewish sector and the Arab sector.

The limited extent of financial aid to the Arab sector is compounded by this sector's limited ability to pay for social services with its own resources. The gap in financial assistance is reflected in several criteria: per-capita expenditure, expenditure per client household, number of caregivers, and number of social programs. The results are a deficient set of social services, limited in its ability to cope properly with the numerous kinds of personal and social distress that exist in the Arab sector, and a void that is being filled by other players.

Summary

The foregoing recommendations express several main dimensions of emphasis: extricating population groups in distress from their plight and anchoring vital services for these groups in laws that would create a standard "basket" of services, about which the public would be explicitly informed. The "service basket" would be funded by central government and provided by municipal authorities and other local organizations. It would create a basis on which local players, with central-government encouragement and assistance, may develop an additional layer of services that meet specific needs of their population. Wherever services are developed, at the national or the local level, it should be done with a maximum of consumer cooperation.

Because so many players (NPOs and businesses) are involved in the personal social services, coordination among them and public control of their activity must be improved.

These recommendations are meant to help create a set of personal social services, at the national and local levels, that can cope appropriately with the many challenges that they face – foremost, the challenge of assisting population groups in severe distress and helping them significantly improve their quality of life.