

# **A Group Sheltered-Employment Program in the Free Market for People with an Intellectual Disability – Evaluation of the Initial Stages**

**Yoav Loeff ■ Yonatan Eyal ■ Dori Rivkin**

The study was initiated by the Division for Research, Planning and Training in Partnership with the Division for the Care of People with an Intellectual Developmental Disability at the Ministry of Labor and Social Affairs and Services and funded with their assistance

# A Group Sheltered-Employment Program in the Free Market for People with an Intellectual Disability – Evaluation of the Initial Stages

Yoav Loeff   Yonatan Eyal   Dori Rivkin

The study was initiated by the Division for Research, Planning and Training in  
Partnership with the Division for the Care of People with  
an Intellectual Developmental Disability at the Ministry of Labor and  
Social Affairs and Services and funded with their assistance

Editor: Raya Cohen

English translation: Naomi Halsted

Graphic design: Anat Perko-Toledano

**Myers-JDC-Brookdale Institute**

Division for Research on Disabilities

P.O.B. 3886

Jerusalem 9103702, Israel

Tel: (02) 655-7400

Fax: (02) 561-2391

Website: [brookdale.jdc.org.il](http://brookdale.jdc.org.il)

## Related Myers-JDC-Brookdale Institute Publications

Naon, D.; Haran, D.; Sofer-Furman, H.; Pinto, O. and Prior, R. 2017. *Employment of General Disability Allowance Recipients following Amendment 109 of the National Insurance Law (Laron Law) Promoting and Obstructing Factors*. Published jointly with the National Insurance Institute, Working Papers 124 (Hebrew only).

Eyal, Y.; Keren-Abraham, Y. and Rivkin, D. 2016. *Evaluation of the "Secure Future" Employment Program for Young Adults with Learning Disabilities and Attention Deficit Disorder*. Published jointly with the National Insurance Institute, Funds for Service Development – Demonstration Projects (Hebrew only).

Keren-Abraham, Y. and Rivkin, D. 2016. *"Supported Employment" – A Competitive Employment Program for People with Disabilities – Evaluation Study*. RR-729-16 (Hebrew).

Loeff, Y. and Rivkin, D. 2015. *People with an Intellectual Developmental Disability Not in Programs of the Ministry of Social Affairs and Services: Survey of the Northern District*. RR-693-15 (Hebrew).

Naon, D.; Hadar, Y.; Kahan-Strawczynski, P.; Vazan-Sikron, L. and Konstantinov, V. 2014. *Young Adults with Disabilities in Israel: Integration into Employment – Resources, Barriers and Needs*. RR-650-14 (Hebrew).

Naon, D.; Strosberg, N.; Ben-Shoham, A.; Haran D.; Prior, R. and Alexander Gealia, D. 2012. *People with Disabilities in Israel's Working-Age Population: Prevalence, Characteristics, and Employment Status*. Published jointly with the National Insurance Institute, Working Papers 110 (Hebrew only).

The publications can be downloaded free of charge from the Institute website: [brookdale.jdc.org.il](http://brookdale.jdc.org.il)

# **Abstract**

## **Background**

Since 2014, the Ministry of Labor and Social Affairs and Services has been implementing a new employment program for people with intellectual developmental disability – "Maas Taasiyati." The program is based on group employment in regular workplaces in the free market accompanied by a work coach and is intended to fill a gap in the continuity of employment services between segregated sheltered workshops and individual supported employment. The Ministry commissioned the Myers-JDC-Brookdale Institute to evaluate the program.

## **Goals**

The purpose of the study is to learn about the implementation of the program in its early years, obstacles to its operation, and its contribution to the target population. This will serve as a basis for decisions regarding the continuation and expansion of the program.

## **Methods**

The study was conducted using a qualitative method, which allows for a thorough study of a range of issues concerning the program. It involved 66 in-depth interviews with employees in the program, their colleagues, their employers and their parents as well as with professionals. It also included structured observations at four employment sites: three industrial plants and one community center.

## **Results**

The study showed that working with the peer group is a significant and positive factor for the employees. Their successful integration into the workplaces and the social connections between them and other workers at the site are obvious. Indeed, the employers, parents and professionals are satisfied with the program and noted its advantages over conventional sheltered workshops, such as higher wages, more interesting work, and in a normative environment. However, the employees are not in a regular employment relationship with employers, and their status has not been sufficiently defined legally.

## **Summary**

The program constitutes a link that was lacking in the continuum of employment services, and it may serve as a suitable framework for many people with disabilities. It is important to ensure the possibility of mobility across the continuum of employment services, according to the changing needs and desires of each employee. It is also important to clarify the legal status of the employment, both to ensure the rights of the employees and to address issues that concern employers and may prevent the opening of new groups. Likewise, it is important to establish an orderly mechanism for determining fair monetary compensation for the program's employees.

# Executive Summary

## Background

In Israel, as in other countries, many people with an intellectual disability (ID) are employed in sheltered workshops where there is no opportunity to meet members of the general public, the work is monotonous and employees earn token wages. At the same time, there is a growing trend towards individual supported employment for people with an ID in competitive jobs. However, at least at present, only a small number of people with an ID – those who are particularly high functioning and do not need constant support – are employed in this way. Suitable employment for people with an ID who have the ability to work at regular jobs but need ongoing support was not available.

To bridge this gap, in the late 1980s, employment services – initially in the United States – began to develop group models for employing people with an ID at regular workplaces, where they receive close, ongoing support from a job coach. In these programs, the employees work in a regular environment but at the same time have the opportunity to belong to a peer group and benefit from closer support than they would find in individual supported employment.

## The Maas Taasiyati Program

Similar group programs have begun to develop in Israel in recent years, at first as somewhat improvised extensions of the regular sheltered workshops. Since 2014, they are being established as part of an official program of the Division for the Care of People with an Intellectual Developmental Disability at the Ministry of Labor and Social Affairs and Services (MOLSA), under the name of "Maas Taasiyati" (MT). By mid-2017, there were 41 such groups all over Israel, operated by six organizations. Most of the groups are in factories or businesses, while others are in community centers belonging to the Israel Association of Community Centers (IACC).

The main goals of the program are as follows:

1. To broaden the range of sheltered employment possibilities for high-functioning people with an ID
2. To create an additional program on the employment continuum between segregated sheltered workshops and individual supported employment
3. To enable participants to integrate in a regular place of work with support from a full-time job coach
4. To serve as transitional employment for individuals interested and capable of advancing to individual supported employment at regular jobs.
5. To expose regular workplaces to the possibility of employing people with disabilities.

## Evaluation Study

MOLSA commissioned Myers-JDC-Brookdale Institute to conduct a preliminary evaluation study of the MT program in order to learn about its implementation in its first years and its contribution to the employment of people with an ID.

## **Study Goals**

The broad goal of the study is to contribute to the discussion and decisions about improving, continuing and expanding the program in order to serve to more people with an ID in Israel. Its specific goals are:

1. To examine implementation of the program from the perspectives of the operating organizations, the employers, the social services, and the participants themselves, with an emphasis on identifying and mapping barriers
2. To examine the contribution of the program as part of MOLSA's employment continuum for people with ID
3. To establish a basis for further study of the MT program and its outcomes at a later stage.

## **Method**

The study was conducted using qualitative methods to collect data from a variety of perspectives, from all parties involved in the program. Four MT groups operated by different organizations at different sites were selected to represent the program – three industrial plants and one community center.

The study team spent a complete workday at each of the four sites and conducted structured observations relating to the work environment and conditions, the activity of the group and the job coach, and the interactions with other employees in the workplace. The researchers also conducted 66 semi-structured interviews with a large number of respondents, in order to compile as broad a picture as possible of the program and its implications. The respondents included employees in the MT groups as well as employers and regular employees at the workplace, parents and relevant professionals – the program coordinators at the operating organizations, group job coaches, professionals at group homes where some of the employees lived, supervisors and coordinators at the MOLSA districts and a local authority social worker. The interviews with the employees were simplified linguistically and cognitively according to their comprehension and communication skills. The study team returned for a second visit to one of the sites to complete the observations and interviews. The interviews were conducted using protocols for semi-structured interviews, which set guidelines for the content but allow flexibility, making it possible for additional topics to be discussed.

The information gathered in the observations and interviews was analyzed in order to discern key themes. The method of analyzing qualitative data consists of careful reading of the content and categorization to discover patterns, trends and conceptual categories. In this case, some of the categories were determined in advance while others were added in the course of reading the interview material.

## **Main Findings**

### **The Employees**

We interviewed 28 employees, 14 men and 14 women, ranging in age from 22-61. Many of the employees had worked previously in sheltered workshops and a few in individual supported

employment. The employees had a range of communication skills from very poor verbal skills to fairly high abilities.

### **Work Environment and Safety**

The work environments of the groups seemed pleasant, relatively quiet, with convenient access to the washrooms, staff lounge or kitchenette and dining room (in places where there is one), and with the possibility of contact with other employees. Much attention was paid to the safety of the groups and their placement in the workspace. In one of the factories visited, special arrangements had been made before the group arrived, which in fact increased safety for all of the employees.

### **Work**

It is clear that the work is carefully matched to the employees' ability and aims to give each of them as much experience as possible in a variety of jobs. The groups employed in factories perform a relatively varied range of packing tasks. In some places, those who are able sometimes go out to assist other departments in or near the factory, without the constant presence of the job coach (but under the supervision of another worker). In the community center, the members of the group (five young ultra-Orthodox women) are employed in a variety of tasks, some of them as a group and some individually, inside the center or in other places in the neighborhood, either part of the time or all of it (in one case). Thus, at least some of the women are not employed as a group. It is apparent that in most cases, the employees at all of the sites perform their tasks well and efficiently after undergoing a learning process with the job coach's help.

### **Satisfaction**

The employees, their parents and staff members in group homes all expressed high satisfaction with the program and the workplaces. Almost all of the employees who noted that they had previously worked at a sheltered workshop reported that they preferred the MT employment. Some of the advantages noted over the sheltered workshops were higher pay, better and more varied work, and better treatment. There was across-the-board satisfaction among all parents interviewed and among the staff members in the homes, all of whom noted that the employees were happy to go to work every day and that working in the MT framework had a positive impact on other areas of their lives as well, such as having more confidence in social situations.

### **Significance of the Group**

Some of the employees reported that working in the group was a meaningful part of their satisfaction with their employment. The good atmosphere in the groups during work was also apparent in the observations. The importance of the group was noted by some of the professionals as well, and one of them emphasized that the secret of the success of the MT was that it enabled the employees to work in a typical place of work and to be in a peer group at the same time.

### **Contact with Other Employees**

Some of the employees reported that they spoke with other employees at the factory or community center beyond what was required for work. The interviews with regular employees at the factories and

the findings of the observations confirm this. Spontaneous interactions were observed between the employees in the groups and other employees, particularly at the factories, and were expressed mainly during breaks, when discussions among the employees and signs of mutual affection were observed. In one of the factories, the group employees were seen sitting together with regular employees in the dining room.

### **Terms of Employment and Earnings**

The employees in the program do not have a regular employment relationship with their employers. Their employment is defined legally as "rehabilitation" and not as "work." Consequently, they are not entitled to payment for vacation or sick leave, they do not receive additional social benefits and their earnings are not considered "salary".

The contract with MOLSA stipulated a minimum payment of NIS 500 a month for full-time work, defined as "compensation for work" rather than as a monthly wage. This minimum sum increases to NIS 900 from the second year of employment. Some of the factories pay group members more – up to about NIS 1,000, sometimes from the first year. The amount also depends on the varying output of the group. However, some of the people interviewed voiced the concern that employers may choose to pay the minimum payment allowed in the contract even if the group's output justifies a higher wage. This compensation, even the minimum amount, is considerably higher than the token wages typically paid in sheltered workshops. On the one hand, it is clear that the low cost for the employers and the fact that they are not bound by the legal requirements of an employment relationship encourages them to open their doors to MT groups and helps them overcome their apprehensions about employing people with an ID. However, several informants reported that the amount paid in relation to the employees' output is frequently lower than that paid to the regular workers. In addition to the compensation, some of the factories also pay for the employees' lunch and transport, give gifts at holidays and birthdays, and invite them to company trips or parties and events with the rest of the staff.

Not all of the employees are aware of the significance of the amount of money they receive, although many were able to state that they are better paid than in regular sheltered workshops. Some of them use the money for routine expenses and others reported that they save the money, with the help of their parents or the group home staff, for a larger expense, such as a smartphone, a computer or an organized tour abroad.

### **Co-payment for Program**

Program participants who do not live in group homes are required to pay around 10% of their disability benefit as a co-payment for the costs of the program (the job coach and program management). The co-payment erodes a considerable amount of their earnings. When transportation is not provided by the employer or the local authority, the participants have to pay for it out of their earnings as well. In such cases, the cost of co-payment for participation coupled with transportation costs may leave them without any earnings. This is problematic as the employees are in fact paying their entire earnings, or most of them, in order to work and earn money. Most of the workers are evidently unaware of this.

For this reason, some parents choose not to have their son or daughter work in MT groups despite the many advantages. Some families took them out of the program, preferring that they stay at home and help around the house if there is no financial advantage to working outside their home.

### **Benefit to the Factory**

According to the employers and the managers interviewed, the MT groups offer the workplace considerable benefits. Beyond the financial gain, the MT groups contribute to the company's morale and public relations. Employers gain very dedicated workers at a very low cost, even in relation to their output, without all of the obligations toward their regular employees. The program also provides an on-site job coach who supervises and instructs the workers, and works beside them. The program is reported by employers as having a positive impact on the atmosphere at the workplace, a sense of making a contribution to society, and an enhanced public image for the organization.

### **The Job Coaches**

The job coaches, who are employed by the operating organizations under the terms stipulated in the contract with MOLSA, are a key factor in the success of the program. They are the mediators between the group, the employers and the operating organization. They manage all aspects of the group members' work and supervise them. At the same time, they work alongside the employees on the production line and supervise the group at meal breaks, make sure the members are safe and well, and help to solve problems. They help to preserve good relations among group members and to strengthen their motivation to work. They write periodic reports about the progress of each member of the group. They also fill a significant therapeutic-rehabilitative role, mainly through discussions with the group during work and at breaks. These discussions often relate to topics that are not directly related to the work itself, such as healthy eating and other lifestyle habits. According to some of the employees, this is often meaningful for them.

The job coaches interviewed for the study are very committed to their work, despite their low salaries – around or slightly above the minimum wage. Some of the professionals in the operating organizations and the ministry expressed concern about rapid burnout of job coaches, both due to the low pay and to the highly complex and isolated nature of the work. At the time of writing, plans are being drafted for training for the job coaches designed to advance their professional identity and create a framework for reciprocal consultations, in the hope that this will help to enhance their ability and reduce burnout.

### **Conclusions**

This preliminary study indicates that the program has significant potential. It is clear that all parties are satisfied with it: the employees, the employers, the regular workers at those workplaces, the parents of the employees, and the professionals at the employees' residential programs. The program evidently has considerable potential for expansion and it is possible that the principles on which it is based could lead to an appropriate employment option for many people with an intellectual disability who are currently employed in segregated sheltered workshops. The program offers an opportunity

for better inclusion in society through support from the work coaches and for working in a peer group alongside integration into "regular" society.

However, the study findings raise several issues that need to be discussed ahead of further expansion and development.

### **Fulfilling the Program Objective on the Employment Continuum**

Given the many positive findings, the program could evidently serve as a key employment path for people with intellectual or other disabilities. It would reduce the amount of sheltered workshops of the conventional kind, retaining them only for individuals needing a more sheltered work environment than can be provided on the free market. Along with the possible benefit to the MT employees, such a development would reduce the costs of building and maintaining sheltered workshops, as there would be less need for such building. It is important for employees in the program to have mobility on the employment continuum. In the course of a lifetime, individuals are likely to experience changes that cause them to want or need a different type of employment – whether to move to increased independence through supported individual employment or, to go in the opposite direction, employment in a more sheltered framework.

As part of the continuum of services, we recommend considering the development of a training program to enable suitable employees who lack work experience to integrate at the MT in a short period.

### **Flexibility of the Model**

Our visits to MT sites illustrated the ability of the model to be flexible and expand the employment continuum. The following are two of the possible variants that we observed: 1. Transition to individual supported employment in the same factory, with the support of the group job coach; 2. Employment for only some of the time outside of the group to experience more complex social and employment challenges without giving up the peer group. An even more flexible model was offered by the Association of Community Centers where some of the employees worked separately from the group for most or all of the work time. It is important to determine the optimum limits of this program as a group model.

### **Therapeutic-Rehabilitative Components of the MT Program**

Unlike the traditional sheltered workshops, in the MT program no budget or time resources are allocated to group activity of a therapeutic-rehabilitative nature. Some of the professionals noted that this was lacking. We recommend examining the possibility of incorporating such activity into the program.

### **Administrative and Organizational Issues for Consideration**

1. Funding for transportation: It is important to examine the issue of funding for transportation to the place of work since the lack of transportation is sometimes a barrier to the opening of additional groups.
2. Workload of inspectors: While dividing the employees into smaller groups in regular workplaces saves the cost of setting up and maintaining buildings for sheltered workshops, it increases the

workload of MOLSA supervisors who need to travel between sites. Consideration should be given to additional staffing for this purpose.

3. Involvement of MOLSA in the program: Representatives of the operating organizations expressed the need for the Ministry to be more involved in developing the program as well as in standardizing procedures and forms, and offering training for the job coaches and program coordinators, so as to create uniform standards and make better use of resources.

### **Need to Clarify the Legal Status of the Employees in the Program**

The MT program as currently implemented is a sort of hybrid between sheltered employment and supported individual employment with no clarification of the legal status of the employees in the program. The participants are employed on the free market but there is no official employment relationship. It was reported in the interviews that some factories decided not to employ MT groups due to concern about this issue. Some factories also expressed concern about the lack of clarity regarding insurance, should an employee be injured on the factory premises. Both the operating organizations and MOLSA noted the importance of determining the legal status of MT employees and removing the uncertainty.

The way that the amount of earnings paid to the MT employees is determined has to be re-examined. Of course, it is important to do so in such a way that it does not reduce employers' motivation to employ the groups and at the same time ensures that the employees will receive fair payment.

### **Follow-Up Study**

The MT program is relatively new and has only been running for a short time in most of the workplaces. This study is a preliminary examination aimed at helping to develop the program and remove barriers to its implementation. Further research is recommended in the future, after changes are introduced following the findings from this study, and, perhaps, after changes in legislation that may affect the program. The follow-up study will shed light on these changes, the impact of the program on the employees over time, and the role of the program on the continuum of employment services for people with an intellectual disability.

# Table of Contents

1. Introduction	1
1.1 Background	1
1.2 From Sheltered Employment to Supported Individual Employment: Development of Models Abroad	2
1.3 Employment Services for People with an ID in Israel	7
2. Evaluation Study	10
2.1 Study Goals	10
2.2 Study Method and Study Instruments	10
3. Findings	13
3.1 Characteristics of the Employees in the Groups in the Study	13
3.2 Suitability of the Population for the Program	13
3.3 Recruitment of the Employees	14
3.4 Work Environment and Safety	14
3.5 Type of Work, Suitability for Employees, and Variety	15
3.6 Satisfaction with the MT Framework	16
3.7 Significance of the Group	18
3.8 Contact with Other Employees	19
3.9 Conditions of Employment and Compensation	20
3.10 Co-Payment for the Program	22
3.11 Benefit for the Factory	22
3.12 The Job Coaches	24
3.13 MT on the Employment Service Continuum	26
3.14 Flexibility of the Model	29
3.15 Therapeutic-Rehabilitative Components	31
3.16 Additional Bureaucratic and Administrative Issues for Consideration	32
3.17 Need for Legalized Status	33
4. Conclusions	34
4.1 Fulfilling the Program Objective on the Employment Continuum	34
4.2 Flexibility of the Model	34
4.3 Therapeutic-Rehabilitative Components of the MT Framework	35
4.4 Additional Administrative and Organizational Issues for Consideration	35
4.5 The Need to Clarify the Legal Status of the Program	35
4.6 Follow-up Study	35
Bibliography	36