

Mapping of Vocational Rehabilitation Programs for People With Autism Spectrum Disorder Toward Their Integration in the Open Labor Market

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Abstract

Background

Autism spectrum disorder (ASD) is a neuro-developmental disability that is characterized by social interaction and communication difficulties and restricted and repetitive behavior patterns and interests, with an impact on various areas of life. Data from Israel and other countries show a significant increase in the prevalence of ASD in recent decades. Given the rising number of people diagnosed with ASD in Israel, the National Insurance Institute seeks to meet the challenge and provide suitable vocational rehabilitation for this population. While many of those with ASD wish and are able to integrate into the labor market, there are numerous challenges to their integration. Along with the National Insurance Institute, the Ministry of Welfare and Social Affairs and the Ministry of Education are operating programs aimed at preparing people with disabilities, in general, and people with ASD, in particular, for integration in the open labor market.

Goal

In view of the large number of programs in this area and the need for structured knowledge on the vocational and occupational aspects of these programs, the National Insurance Institute commissioned the Myers-JDC-Brookdale Institute to map the programs currently operating in Israel and identify key issues regarding the implementation of the programs as well as issues related to the policy in Israel on the promotion of the integration of people with ASD in the labor market.

Research Methods

- a. **Locating information on vocational rehabilitation programs** intended for people with disabilities, in general, and people with ASD, in particular, by reviewing websites and publications of government ministries, the IDF, civil sector organizations, and private bodies that operate programs for these populations.
- b. **Distributing an open-ended, self-administered questionnaire** among contact persons for the located programs, asking for information on the program, e.g., year of launching, place of operation, program goals, program duration, characteristics of the participants, and funding and supervisory entities.
- c. **Conducting semi-structured in-depth interviews** with the aim of learning about the vocational rehabilitation programs funded by the National Insurance Institute. In total, 29 interviews were conducted with: **policy-makers**

involved in the promotion of employment among people with ASD (5); **managers of vocational rehabilitation programs** funded with the assistance of the National Insurance Institute (7); **program graduates** (9); **parents of program graduates** (3); **employers** of program graduates (5).

Key Findings

The review of information regarding the programs (research method a, above) indicates that 28 programs for the promotion of the integration of people with disabilities in the labor market are currently implemented in Israel, some of them, dedicated programs for people with ASD and others, intended for people with disabilities, in general. The programs were classified under five types: (1) **preparation for integration in the open labor market**; (2) **vocational training**; (3) **knowledge/degree acquisition**; (4) **'preparation for life'** programs (including occupational subject matter); (5) **preparation for military or national-civic service**.

Ten of the programs are recognized by the National Insurance Institute and entitle participants to refunds for the costs involved in participation – whether a full or partial refund (depending on the type of program). Tuition and other expenses (travel expenses, rent, etc.) are funded with the assistance of the National Insurance Institute in accordance with eligibility criteria. Seven of these ten programs are dedicated vocational rehabilitation programs for people with ASD. Six of the seven programs, defined as 'pre-rehabilitation programs,' offer participants diverse experiences with the aim of identifying tendencies, abilities, and preferences and assisting them in choosing the right path – studies, training, or employment. The other program is a vocational rehabilitation program (professional training in software quality assurance). Three of the ten programs are guidance and support programs intended to help participants studying in higher education institutions to complete their studies and prepare them for 'the day after.'

The 18 programs that are not recognized by the National Insurance Institute are operated, for the most part, on behalf of the Ministry of Welfare and Social Affairs and under its supervision, some of them with the participation of the Ministry of Education. One of the 18 programs is operated by the IDF and the programs preparing participants for national-civic service are operated on behalf of the Authority for National-Civic Service, through civil sector organizations.

The review of information regarding the programs and the interviews indicate the following:

1. With the exception of the nationwide programs, most other programs are implemented in central Israel and some, in northern Israel. Only few programs are implemented in southern Israel and not even one, south of Be'er Sheva.

2. The programs currently implemented in Israel provide a limited response as only a small number of groups are opened by each program. Some of the programs have difficulty attracting participants for the opened groups, so that the opening of new groups is delayed, undermining the economic viability of running the programs.
3. The programs contribute, among other things, to the development of the participants' independence and initiative, enhance their self-esteem, improve their social skills, help them in building a network of social ties, and support their digital upskilling.
4. One of the key elements of the programs is the ongoing support provided to both program graduates and their colleagues and employers at the workplace.
5. The involvement of parents of program participants is evident and significant. Some of the programs take action to enlist the parents' help in promoting their children's independence and supporting them in the process and share with the parents any progress made by their children in the course of the program.

Recommendations

This report presents recommendations in three areas: (1) **recommendations for implementation by the National Insurance Institute** regarding, among other things, the establishment of a database of rehabilitation programs, the institutionalization of a program monitoring and control system, the definition of eligibility criteria for ongoing long-term training and support, and the development of services for different population groups, including the Arab and ultra-Orthodox population in Israel; (2) **recommendations for the improvement of existing programs and new programs in planning**, e.g., recommendations for establishing the participant's acceptance of the ASD diagnosis as a prerequisite for enrollment in the programs, adapting the subject matter to participants with various characteristics, offering alternatives for rejected applicants, encouraging girls' participation in the programs, and promoting parent involvement as an inherent part of the programs; (3) **recommendations regarding the enlisting of employers and the improvement of placement options**, e.g., recommendations for engaging several program graduates in the same workplace, highlighting the advantages of employing people with ASD, enlisting the support of colleagues at the workplace, providing the required accommodations for program graduates, and monitoring their performance at work.