Ministry of Welfare
and Social Affairs

Welfare Services during the Israel-Hamas War – Interim Conclusions

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Abstract

Background

On October 7, 2023, the Hamas terrorist organization launched a surprise attack on the communities bordering on the Gaza Strip that led Israel to declare war on Hamas. The surprise attack, and the Israel-Hamas War that ensued, resulted in a great number of physical and emotional casualties, the displacement of hundreds of thousands from their homes, and severe damage to property and livelihoods. These events are unprecedented in the history of the State of Israel, creating challenges unlike those that Israel has ever experienced.

Since October 7th, the social welfare services have been on the front lines in providing immediate and ongoing services to the victims, including the families of fallen civilians and soldiers and of those abducted, the direct victims and survivors of the inferno, and many others who were indirectly affected. With the onset of the current crisis, the social welfare services quickly mobilized to care for the victims, but they have faced, and continue to face, barriers and challenges of various kinds, some due to longstanding problems and others that have arisen as a result of the current crisis.

Objectives

About a month after the outbreak of the war, the Ministry of Welfare and Social Affairs (hereafter, the Ministry of Welfare or the Ministry) decided to initiate a rapid assessment process to arrive at interim conclusions regarding the performance of the Ministry and of the social welfare services during the war in order to identify barriers to optimal service delivery, remove obstacles faced by employees in fulfilling their functions, and improve the quality of their work.

Methodology

The research was conducted using a mixed-method approach within an exploratory sequential design consisting of two stages. The first stage was qualitative and involved an analysis of the professional literature that addresses organizational and systemic aspects of the issue, with an emphasis on crisis and emergency situations. In addition, semi-structured in-depth interviews were conducted with key personnel in the Ministry headquarters and in its districts. The second, quantitative, stage involved online surveys among professionals at the Ministry headquarters and in its district offices as well as among employees in the local social services departments, with the goal of mapping organizational and personal needs and the obstacles they face.

Main Findings

66.4% of the respondents from the Ministry reported a change in their functions, responsibilities, or target populations (more so among respondents in the districts), as did 58.9% of the respondents in the social services departments. In both surveys, satisfaction with the functioning of the welfare services since the outbreak of the war was found to be high or very high (86.6% of the respondents in the Ministry, and 81.5% of the respondents working in the social services departments).

Respondents in both surveys emphasized the importance of strengthening emotional intervention, emotional support, and care for service recipients, as well as the support and guidance provided to employees and employee training. Respondents from the Ministry also highlighted the need to strengthen outreach services, the utilization of rights among service recipients, and community intervention. In contrast, employees in the social services departments more frequently reported the need to enhance therapeutic responses, particularly in the form of emotional interventions and support.

It should be noted that response rates were low in both surveys (18.0% in the Ministry, and 2.3% in the social services departments). Possible reasons include problems in the distribution of the questionnaires to the employees, the employees' lack of availability due to the emergency, or their lack of confidence in the Ministry's leadership.

Recommendations

Organizational and systemic level
- Improving coordination inside and outside the Ministry and strengthening the body integrating the emergency work within the ministry, between government ministries, and with local authorities and civil society organizations,
- Streamlining the conveyance of information between departments and to the evacuation centers regarding the needs of service recipients and the previous services provided to them,
- Clearly defining the division of responsibility and authority in emergency work between the various units in the headquarters and districts, and communicating them to department employees, so they know who to turn to when encountering various barriers,
- Emphasizing medium- and long-term planning (including for the post-war period) and determining the appropriate balance between emergency work and routine activity,

- Implementing a professional training and learning system focused on target audiences including: diagnosis and treatment of trauma, emotional support and care, work with families and youth-at-risk, etc.,

- Providing guidance and support to employees dealing with emotional difficulties including: emotional and professional support to address burnout and secondary traumatization, and stress-relieving activities for employees,

- Maximum consideration of employees' needs and flexibility in work arrangements: considering changing work needs due to the situation (spouses on reserve duty and partial reopening of schools), approval of overtime, and allowing work from home,

- Empowering employees and giving them professional discretion: delegating authority,

- Requesting continuous feedback from the field: ongoing collection of information on routine and evolving needs and updates on available responses and solutions,

- Establishing a simple and accessible digital tool for ongoing mapping, documenting, and managing information about evacuees, including their demographic information, needs, and the responses provided to them in evacuation centers and the relevant social service departments,

- Employee compensation: recognizing and appreciating employees for their commitment and effort.

Service recipient level

- Strengthening the intervention system in the mental-emotional domain, with an emphasis on trauma, support, and emotional care, even after the end of the war and for an extended period thereafter,

- Enhancing community resilience through community support, strengthening of local leadership, and creating supplementary services,

- Strengthening support and guidance for service recipients in exercising their rights,

- Focusing on the development of services for populations at increased risk, particularly youth, direct victims, and evacuees.