

# **Policy Changes in the “Service for the Child and Youth” and their Implementation: Deriving Successful Operational Principles from Veteran Employees**

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# Abstract

## Background

The Service for the Child and Youth (hereinafter: the Service) at the Ministry of Welfare and Social Affairs (hereinafter: the Ministry of Welfare) served for many years (until its merger in 2016 with the Service for the Welfare of the Individual and the Family) as the body that shaped policy and methods of operation in the realm of children and youth at risk and their parents. Over the years, the Service, which was composed of four branches (community services, residential institutions, foster care services, and the Youth Law Unit), underwent several processes of change and development, with respect to both the ministry's policy and its implementation and to its work with other government ministries and related bodies.

This study was an initiative of a forum of past senior employees of the Service. It is based on the understanding that, in addition to the knowledge accumulated from studies that examined the implementation and impact of programs designed to address the needs of at-risk children and youth, extensive knowledge has also been accumulated by those responsible for the formulation and implementation of overall policy. Unlike the knowledge derived from research, which is explicit and well-known, this knowledge is implicit and less accessible.

The study focused on a period of approximately twenty years, namely the last decade of the twentieth century and the first decade of the twenty-first. This period was characterized by a major step forward in the Service's policies and methods of operation in the realm of children and youth at risk and their parents, which were instilled in field professionals and whose impact is still evident today. This included strengthening the system of community services and the continuity between community and out-of-home services; professionalizing foster care services, residential institutions, and the Youth Law; adopting data-driven processes for care and service planning; and strengthening partnerships with the children's parents. The time that has elapsed allows for an overview of the developments that occurred in those years and of the methods of operation that facilitated them.

## Objectives

This study is not intended to survey the entirety of the Service's activities during those years, but rather to extract insights and operational principles that were implemented in order to promote changes in policy and work procedures in a field that is both complex and challenging. Obtaining this implicit knowledge, and integrating it with the knowledge gained from research, may provide fertile ground for learning and practice of professionals and decision makers who are engaged in promoting policy and processes of change.

## **Methodology**

The research was conducted using a qualitative methodology and included personal interviews and focus groups with members of the Service's headquarters and with national and regional supervisors who worked in the four branches of the Service during this period. The interviewees were asked to describe significant changes that had occurred in the work of the Service in which they were involved or to which they were exposed. Their descriptions were used to derive principles of operation that can assist in advancing processes of change.

## **Main Findings**

The period in question was characterized by a growing public awareness of the needs of children at risk, which was expressed in public discourse and political activity and in the growth of research and development organizations dealing with the issue. This situation—along with the structure of the Service at that time, which enabled a comprehensive view of the needs of the target population and collaboration among all professionals within the Service, and a Service headquarters with a clear strategic and ideological/professional approach, which encouraged entrepreneurship and innovation—supported the advancement of policy changes and the development of new methods of operation.

The following principles of operation adopted by the Service's professionals have enabled them to promote policy change for the benefit of the system and the target population:

### **Formulating an overall strategy, a proactive approach, and activity in the public-political domain**

1. Strategic planning of the methods of operation based on a comprehensive view of the environment in which the service functions and the needs of the target population
2. Leveraging criticism and crises to promote desired change
3. Being present and engagement in arenas where decisions are made, such as Knesset committees and public committees
4. Creating collaborations and strategic alliances with political, public, and professional entities: maintaining continual contact, building relationships based on trust and mutual respect, standing firm on professional principles, learning the "language" and interests of each entity, and maintaining the Service's status as a leader in policy making.

## **Advancing the implementation of processes of change in the local arena**

1. Mobilizing regional supervisors as leaders of change, to engage professionals operating on the local level (in local authorities, social services departments, residential institutions, and service-providing NGOs), encouraging commitment, and creating partnerships. This involves constant presence in the field, continuous communication, support and guidance, attentiveness and responsiveness to needs, granting autonomy and tolerance of local initiatives, insisting on the maintenance of professional standards, and sharing information, knowledge, and thought processes regarding the planning of change.
2. Increasing the likelihood of dissemination, implementation, and sustainability of projects and initiatives by strategically selecting locations for piloting experimental programs and newly developed services, creating organizational and budgetary conditions to support continued dissemination after the pilot phase, and developing mechanisms, processes, and written procedures to promote execution and measure progress.

## **Creating supportive mechanisms**

1. Developing professional doctrine, processes, and tools for policy implementation
2. Using measurement and research tools to identify national and local needs, to assess the efficiency and effectiveness of services and policies and persuade stakeholders in the political and budgetary systems of the need for additional funding
3. Developing ongoing processes of professionalization, training, and learning, with the assistance of academic institutions in Israel and elsewhere
4. Utilizing organizational consultation processes in the implementation of change.