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**Employment of People with Disabilities during the Corona Pandemic**

**Boaz Herman, CEO of ILAN, ISRAEL**

In Israel, there are about one and a half million people with disabilities - about half a million of these people are of working age and have been determined by the National Insurance Institute to have a disability of 20% or more. In 2016, it was discovered that 270,000 of this public are not working and it is estimated that today, in the shadow of the Corona virus crisis, their number exceeds 300,000. This translates into hundreds of thousands of households experiencing a difficult and ongoing crisis: financially, health-wise and mentally-health wise. Some of these people are falling into poverty and need additional support and care from the welfare system. The obvious question is - Is this their destiny? The following is an outline of a practical solution to this pressing problem. If the State implements even a part of this plan, it may save money and add to the quality of life of people with disabilities and their families.

Various surveys conducted during the Corona pandemic by the Ministry of Welfare, ILAN and other organizations, found that between 41% - 56% of people with disabilities and their parents report feelings of depression, anxiety and loneliness. By comparison, among the general population, 30% of people aged 21 and over report that their general state has worsened during the crisis. A large part of these feelings stems from disruption of routine, economic uncertainty and loss of employment and a supportive environment.

People with disabilities routinely struggle to achieve equal employment opportunities. The data show that the employment rate of people with disabilities is only about 50% compared to 81% among people without disabilities (Central Bureau of Statistics 2016). This is without acute crises such as the Corona pandemic. Now that employers have been required to close down for economic reasons and due to limitations by the Ministry of Health, thousands of people with disabilities have been sent home - four times that of the general public. These people now suffer from loneliness and severe distress.

But the economic, social and psychological harm does not only affect people with disabilities: Surveys conducted by ILAN over the past two years (Smith Institute, 2018, 2020) show that between 60% and 70% of parents stated that caring for children and adults with disabilities that live with them prevent them from being able to work in an orderly fashion. Furthermore, the family unit is in a constant state of turmoil and especially during times such as these.

The good news is that by combining strengths, creative thinking and goodwill it is possible to do more and to do differently and here are some examples:

1. Training - Training for employment in preferred occupations is one of the most effective ways to assimilate required employees into the employment market. This principle is also true for people with disabilities and the State can prioritize areas and professions according to the needs of the economy. But unfortunately, in spite of good intentions and even a budget, people with disabilities are forgotten again. The Ministry of Finance, the Ministry of Economy and the Ministry of Innovation recently issued a tender for a training system project for a total of 60 million shekels! Such a project could be a significant motivating force that would help promote the placement of people with disabilities for their benefit, and for the benefit of the Israeli economy. But, despite awareness to the issue and laws requiring adequate representation of people with disabilities in the job market - a combination of 3% in the business sector, and 5% in the public sector - these government ministries have not implemented the requirement for adequate representation in this aforementioned tender. So, in this way, we have one hand legislating and the other hand violating. Ultimately, when one looks at the matter from an economic viewpoint, in the end, the State must pay subsidies to people with disabilities when they are not working and when their health is deteriorating and the functioning of the family cell is impaired.

2. Stipends - A person with a severe disability who does not work, receives a sum of approximately 3,300 shekels from the State every month. When he or she goes to work, this allowance is reduced and gradually canceled. It would be a wise decision to give people with disabilities, especially during this period, an incentive for one year, during which they would be able to enjoy Social Security benefits, but also to enter the job market. Not only would the State not suffer losses from this, it would benefit from a productive public, functioning family units, a healthy society and savings in future benefits.

3. Incentives for employers: Remuneration from the State to private employers, certainly when it comes to small businesses, would directly and immediately help to absorb employees with disabilities. Such an incentive could be combined with a one-time sum or a benefit in taxation or property tax.

4. Alleviating concerns: Addressing the concerns of employers and potential employees - Success in the significant placement of people with disabilities in Israel will be possible provided that employers do not fear the employment of people with disabilities. In the mirror image, even among people with disabilities, there are anxieties that arise when contemplating letting go of the sense of security that comes from regular, ongoing stipends. These anxieties can be assuaged by emphasizing the huge gain that comes from entering the job market which includes a sense of satisfaction and meaning, a stable salary, a feeling of self-worth and a network of connections. The task of making the employer accessible to the employee and helping the employer to become acquainted with the employee's needs, can be carried out efficiently and professionally through third sector organizations that are deeply familiar with the field of people with disabilities, as well as the associated challenges, opportunities, complexities and bureaucratic entanglement. As the State reaches out for real cooperation with the relevant organizations, it will find a professional and avid civilian army that will be a true partner in this national mission.

Employing people with disabilities will improve their situation socially, psychologically, and with regard to their overall health. It will have a positive family, community and civic impact. It is important for the State to invest today in integrating people with disabilities into the job market rather than paying later in welfare benefits, in dealing with health problems and in declining social resilience in Israel. Without the establishment of an interdisciplinary headquarters dealing with the employment and mental health fields in which government ministries, authorities and non-profit organizations are partners, everything will remain in the realm of discussion. Therefore, immediate action must be taken and a realistic goal must be set for 2021.