



The State Comptroller
and Ombudsman of Israel



State of Israel

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Challenges and Goals in Providing Services for Older Persons -
Lessons Learned from the Investigation of Complaints

The Ombudsman



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This special report of the Ombudsman is presented to the Knesset (Israeli parliament) under the provisions of Section 46(b) of State Comptroller Law, 5718-1958 [Consolidated Version]. The report details challenges and goals in the provision of services for older persons as disclosed by the complaints filed by older persons.



"Wisdom is with the aged, and understanding in length of days" (Job, 12:12)

"He who learns from the old, to what is he compared?"

To one who eats ripe grapes and drinks aged wine" (Ethics of the Fathers, 4:20)

Opening Remarks of the Ombudsman and the Head of the Office of the Ombudsman

This special report of the Ombudsman is presented to the Knesset (Israeli parliament) under Section 46(b) of State Comptroller Law 5718-1958 [Consolidated Version].

According to the vision of the Office of the State Comptroller and Ombudsman, the Office of the Ombudsman must be an objective, professional and accessible body, investigating complaints received from any person in order to ensure the upholding of their rights and the promotion of effective and just public service for all sectors of society. The special report placed before you illustrates in the best way possible how the Office of the State Comptroller fulfills this vision in practice as regards investigating the complaints of older persons and making its services accessible to this community.

The report before you shines a spotlight on the aging of the population throughout the world and in Israel, and presents challenges and goals pertaining to the provision of services for older persons, as disclosed through the investigation of complaints filed with the Office of the Ombudsman by this community. The aim of the report is to allow early and optimal preparedness for coping with this phenomenon and rendering appropriate public services.

We are living in an age in which public bodies and others are making increasing use of digital means of communication. However, the relative low digital literacy of older persons makes it difficult for them to use digital means for receiving service from public bodies. Indeed, the report laid before you shows that the trend in digitalization of public services causes

problems for the community of older persons, and that although the digital literacy of older persons has been increasing in recent years, it is still much lower than that of other sectors of the population. In this regard, it should be pointed out that during the Covid-19 pandemic, when digital means became the primary, and often the only, means of communication between the public and public bodies, there was an increase in the use of representatives to file complaints on behalf of older persons aged 70 and above with the Office of the Ombudsman.

This special report is innovative from a number of aspects. Most importantly, it examines the issue of public services given to older persons from the perspective of this community of service users, and innovative tools were used in the writing of the report. The report is based on the data gathered by the Office of the Ombudsman and its statistical analyses relating to the characteristics of older complainants; on an analysis of the discourse of older persons and their relatives on the social networks; on an analysis of the data included in the responses of 55 ombudsman institutions across the globe to a questionnaire that the Office sent out about the investigation of complaints of older persons; and on research addressing the rights of older persons and the right to access the administration.

The report seeks to bring the issue of public services received by older persons both to the attention of public bodies in charge of providing services for this community and to the attention of persons dealing with the investigation of complaints in the public bodies. They will all find in the report tools and insights that will serve them in the provision of services for older persons and in the continuation of their activity in this field.

All public servants rendering services for older persons must remember that they are dealing with human beings and must take into account their special circumstances and needs, regardless of their

age. Older persons receiving the service are entitled to respect, without a prejudicial, stereotyping or patronizing approach to their advanced age. Service providers must listen to older persons, including to their expressed needs and preferences. Furthermore, when the service is being given to older persons, public servants must ensure that the needs of the older persons, relating to their age, are being addressed. All these require the service provider to be flexible and sensitive, to ensure respectful communication, to simplify the bureaucratic processes, to exercise broad discretion and to facilitate as far as possible the realization of rights by persons who encounter difficulties in doing so.

The Office of the Ombudsman will continue to lend a listening ear to communities deserving special attention and to focus on broadening its accessibility and availability to these communities, as to the population at large. We invite the public in general and older persons in particular, to continue receiving assistance from the Office whenever they encounter difficulties in exercising their rights or receiving a service from a public body.



Matanyahu Englman
State Comptroller
and Ombudsman



Dr. Esther Ben-Haim, Adv.
Head of the Office
of the Ombudsman

Preface

Israel's population is going through an ageing process, and the life expectancy of its citizens is increasing. The community of people aged 65 and over (older persons) has grown both in absolute numbers and in its percentage of the overall population of Israel. For example, in 1955 the percentage of older persons in the total population stood at 8.4% and in 2021 - 12.2% (a 2.5 increase).

At the end of 2021, close to 41% of older persons were aged 75 and over and 11.8% of them were aged 85 and over. The increase in the number of older persons and their percentage of the total population will continue and will even grow in the coming years. According to the forecasts, by 2040 the number of persons aged 65 and over in Israel will reach some 2 million, and their percentage of the population will stand at 14.2%; the number of people aged 75 and over will reach 1,065,200; and the number of people aged 85 and over will reach some 400,000. In 2065, the percentage of older persons is expected to reach 15.3%¹.

7,832 older persons filed complaints with the Office of the Ombudsman between the years 2019 and 2021. The number of older complainants increased by 23.3% from 2019 to 2021.

The special report deals with the segment of the population of people aged 65 and over. The members of this segment are frequently called "senior citizens". Yet since the special report relates to all persons aged 65 and over, even if they are not Israeli citizens², this special age group is referred to as "older persons" in the report.

The community of older persons is characterized by major diversities in many matters, including physical and cognitive capabilities, skills,

1 See Central Bureau of Statistics, **Indicators for Optimal Ageing in Israel, 2020** (November 2022), p. 26; and "International Senior Citizen's Day 2021: Selected data on Various Topics Regarding Israeli Senior Citizens aged 65 and Over" (29.9.21).

2 Section 33 of State Comptroller Law, 5718-1958 [Consolidated Version], provides that **any person** may file a complaint with the Ombudsman.

proficiencies and degree of independence. Since this community is not homogeneous, care must be taken not to adopt a stereotypic attitude in describing it, assuming that older persons are dependent on others or have uniform needs.

Having said this, and despite the many differences between older persons, where receiving services from government authorities is concerned it is possible to identify prominent characteristics, needs, barriers, difficulties and challenges that are common to many of them and related to their age.

Older persons receiving public service encounter several types of difficulties and challenges. The following are the most prominent ones:

1. Ageism - stereotypic or prejudicial attitude towards persons, irrespective of their specific characteristics as individuals, but on the basis of the age group to which they belong³. An ageism attitude towards older persons receiving services can, for example, take the form of ascribing to them old-fashioned views⁴, limited physical ability and dependence, irrespective of their actual condition. Where ageism is prevalent in public bodies and among service providers, it is likely to constitute a perceptual barrier that affects the ability of older persons to exercise their rights. Ageism can be personal - on the part of a particular service provider, but it can also be institutional - reflected in regulations, directives and policy⁵. The offensiveness of this perception causes pain, even if no evil intent is meant by the person holding it.
2. Lack of understanding of service providers towards old age and its possible effect on service receivers. When service providers treat older persons like any other service receivers - without checking if they are restricted in any way or if there exist other special circumstances, and without taking into account such restrictions or circumstances or suggesting solutions for helping to cope with them - this is likely to pose serious difficulties for older persons, and in certain cases even cause them to relinquish their rights.

3 World Health Organization, "Global report on ageism" (2021).

4 Iris Kleinman Ha'Etzni, Looking Back: Life Stories through Psychological Eyes (2022), pp. 58 - 59.

5 World Health Organization, "Global report on ageism" (2021).

3. Lack of knowledge of the laws and directives concerning older persons, which are designed to facilitate the take-up of their rights. This lack of knowledge makes it difficult for older persons to exercise their rights and receive the best service for them.
4. Awareness and knowledge barriers stemming from the lack of awareness of eligible persons of the existence of the right, its terms, content and the way of exercising it. These barriers can also stem from language and communication difficulties; bureaucratic barriers, including complex processes for the realization of rights, a request to go in person to the offices of the authority, multiple forms, requests for unavailable information and others; digital barriers regarding persons who make no use of digital means, as well as those who have access to digital means but encounter different degrees of difficulty in the digital environment; and perceptual, psychological and cultural barriers.

The report focuses on older persons as receivers of service from the state authorities and on how they experience receiving the service. It highlights the barriers facing older persons when receiving services from public bodies. It also includes recommendations for service providers in these bodies in general and for complaint handlers in particular as to how to tailor the service that they provide to the needs of older persons. The report contains five chapters:

1. A statistical analysis of the characteristics of older complainants, of the bodies against which older persons frequently complain and of the main subjects of their complaints. This is based on the findings of the in-depth analysis conducted by the Central Bureau of Statistics relating to data on these complainants. In order to draw attention to particularly vulnerable communities of older persons, the report also presents data on Holocaust survivors and persons requiring welfare services.
2. The public service given to older persons and their service experience, based on the complaints investigated by the Office of the Ombudsman. The chapter focuses on three types of difficulty affecting the service experience of older persons: bureaucratic barriers and delays in the provision of public services; the digitalization of public service; the feeling of older persons that service providers treat them in an offensive and irreverent manner, on the basis of their age and the limitations it generates.

3. An analysis of the discourse of older persons and their relatives on the social networks as regards the accessibility of public service, from the perspective of the service receiver. In recent years, the discourse on social networks has become a central arena in which the public can express its feelings. Among other things, the analysis disclosed that older persons are not always aware of the rights to which they are entitled and the bodies against which a complaint may be filed. The analysis also revealed the difficulty of older persons in navigating bureaucratic intricacies, and the difficulties posed by the digitalization of public services.
4. A survey of the actions of ombudsman institutions around the world pertaining to the investigation of complaints of older persons. This chapter will also present the findings of the analysis of responses to a questionnaire on the subject of the investigation of complaints of older persons that the Office of the Ombudsman sent out to ombudsman institutions around the world.
5. Tailoring public service to older persons - recommendations to the public bodies that provide services, and in particular to bodies that handle the complaints of older persons, to improve the service rendered by them. The recommendations are aimed at all the bodies in the public sector that provide services for older persons and at regulatory bodies responsible for dealing with older persons. The recommendations address four areas: the accumulation and processing of data disclosed by the inquiries and complaints; the construction of a format for providing services that are tailored to older persons and the training of public servants to provide services according to this format; outreach and awareness-raising activities for older persons; making public service and the ways of filing complaints accessible to older persons.

The increase in the number of older persons and their percentage of the population of Israel, their grappling with difficulties that arose during the Covid-19 pandemic, and the desire to increase the number of people from this community turning to the Office of the Ombudsman - all these led the Office to focus its activities on older persons in 2021, the year the Office celebrated its 50th anniversary. The climax of the Office's activity in its Jubilee year was the hosting of an international conference on the theme "Advancing the Rights of Older People in an Age of Longevity". Ombudsmen and colleagues from 51 countries across the globe participated in the conference,

which included a special panel for the promotion of rights of older persons on which sat experts - ombudsmen from different countries and representatives from the academia and the third sector⁶ - who contributed from their experience and expertise in this special field. The Office shared the insights gained from the conference, and from the speeches made in the course of it, with the ombudsmen from Israel and overseas. The report addresses these insights in depth.

This special report is the product of the activity of the Office of the Ombudsman that was focused on older persons, and which is reflected, among others things, in the hosting of the international conference at the end of 2021.

The aim of the special report is to emphasize the fundamental and deep obligation of government authorities and public bodies in Israel to tailor the service that they provide to the important and central community of older persons. This customization may be required in a variety of aspects of service, such as in providing information about the service, in making the service accessible, in facilitating the ways of contacting the authority; also in the manner in which the service is provided, the form of communication with the service seeker, the place in which the service is rendered and the language in which it is provided. This is the case with regard to public service in general and to bodies handling complaints in particular. Service providers in public bodies must be attentive to the needs of older persons, to customize the service as far as possible and to treat them politely, respectfully and patiently.

⁶ The panel was moderated by Johnathan Marcovitch, Adv. Senior Head of Department at the Office of the Ombudsman. The panel members were Mr. Rob Behrens, Parliamentary and Health Service Ombudsman UK; Ms. Karen Gomez-Dumpit, Commissioner on Human Rights of the Philippines; Prof Issi Doron, Dean, Faculty of Social Welfare and Health Sciences, University of Haifa; Ms. Silvia Perel- Levin, Chair, NGO Committee on Ageing, Geneva; and Mr. Mark C. Miller, Long Term Care Ombudsman of the District of Columbia (Washington D.C.), President of the National Association of State Long-Term Care Ombudsman (NASOP).



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