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# SUMMARY

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# MESILA

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## DEAR PARTNERS AND FRIENDS,

2020 was no doubt one of the most challenging and complex years we have ever known.

The COVID-19 pandemic had an adverse impact on the health, financial and psychosocial resilience of many people across the globe. Unprecedented implications on disenfranchised populations, such as asylum seekers and undocumented people, have been especially devastating.

Immediately following the outbreak of the pandemic, we acted quickly to adapt Mesila's services to this new imposed reality. During the last year Mesila staff worked around the clock to address the basic needs of thousands of members of the community, providing critical direct financial assistance and psychosocial support. We also ensured that all pandemic-related information published by various government agencies was made accessible to the community, in addition to coordinating and sharing this information with all organizations working in the sector.

We continue to provide extensive social services to all Mesila clients and promote and implement programs that address the needs of the community as they arise.

I would like to extend my gratitude to the Mesila team for their boundless dedication, immense flexibility, and ability to think outside the box, which enabled us to offer meaningful services to the community during this on-going crisis.

Furthermore, on behalf of the entire team, I would like to express our greatest appreciation to our partners – foundations, government agencies, and private individuals – for the integral support you have provided to the community during this year. Your commitment and generous contributions have mitigated the hardships of the most vulnerable families from the asylum seeker community.

**I am proud to present the major highlights of Mesila's activities in 2020.**

Sincerely,  
**Miri Barbero-Elkayam**  
Director of Mesila



## A SUMMARY OF MESILA'S ACTIVITIES IN 2020

Mesila is the largest center in Israel of its kind - a unique Municipal unit providing direct assistance to approximately 10,000 children, women and men from the asylum seeker community, and other undocumented people, in addition to indirect assistance to more than 20,000 people.

Mesila's vision is to improve the quality of life of asylum seekers in Tel-Aviv, in all aspects of their lives.

Mesila's services focus on the most vulnerable segment of the asylum seeker community: at-risk children and their families, children with special needs and their families, and survivors of slavery and human trafficking. We are committed to improving the quality of care and education for children during the critical years of early childhood, and work to strengthen the existing support mechanisms within the community.

Mesila's activities are developed and implemented in direct partnership with the community leaders and community based organizations. The organization's programs emphasize a localized approach to addressing needs of the community, while maximizing the community's strengths and assets; therefore, we are able to identify culturally contextualized areas where we can expand our specialized services and assistance. Approximately 60% of Mesila's operations are funded by the Municipality and the Ministry of Social Affairs and Social Services, and around 40% by donors and partners.

Mesila staff is composed of 45 women, most of whom are social workers and pedagogical experts. The team is assisted by 90 volunteers, who receive guidance and extensive training.



## MESILA IN NUMBERS

There are six units in Mesila:

- **Treating Children and Families At-Risk** – in 2020, our social workers treated about 1,200 children at-risk, with an emphasis on children subjected to neglect, physical abuse, sexual abuse and extreme poverty. 65% of parents treated are single mothers, 26% of children reported suffering from violence by their parents, 232 parents reported severe emotional distress or a physical disability. None of the families and children assisted are eligible for governmental social security allowances.
- **Treating Children with Special Needs and Their Families** – in 2020, our social workers treated 360 children with special needs (including siblings) and provided them with social care, helped them access and exercise their rights, referred them to assessment tests, found suitable placements for them, held support groups, secured funding for health insurance, and more.
- **Providing Assistance to Children in Early Childhood** – the early childhood team works with the "babysitters" (informal childcare centers) serving the community. In 2020, the team provided pedagogical training and guidance to 17 babysitters with about 400 children. The team held courses and seminars for caregivers, provided tools and information for parents, improved physical conditions and more. The unit also specializes in early detection of children-at-risk and children with special needs, advancing the transition from "babysitters" to municipal government day care centers, working with the community's afterschool settings and providing orientation to municipal kindergarten staff.
- **The Advocacy and Support Center and Community Work** – The center assists mainly with the realization of individual and collective rights, initial social assistance and advocacy with an emphasis on: children's rights (educational, health and social), women in the cycle of violence, health (children and adults), promoting policy changes etc. Mesila's Advocacy and Support Center received 9,869 applications in 2020. The community work at the Center advances and empowers the community through diverse activities held with and for its members, develops leadership, promotes community projects, manages Mesila Facebook page, establishes groups of agents of change for preventing domestic violence and family planning counseling, and more.
- **The Paramedical Treatment Center** – the Center offers art therapy, occupational therapy and speech therapy to children treated by Mesila. In 2020, the Center treated 250 children and their parents through a variety of individual and group therapies. The Center also runs a therapeutic playroom for parents and children.
- **The National Center for Survivors of Human Trafficking and Slavery** – many asylum seekers were abducted in the Sinai desert and held for ransom. They experienced severe trauma, forced labor, physical abuse and rape. Most of them suffer from PTSD, depression, acute health problems and other issues. The treatment provided at the Center is holistic and includes psychosocial, humanitarian, financial and legal support, group therapy sessions and social activities. **250 male and female survivors of human trafficking and slavery and 150 of their children are treated at the center.**

## MESILA DURING COVID-19 PANDEMIC:

The COVID-19 pandemic has had a devastating impact on asylum seekers and other undocumented people, many of whom continue to suffer the affects of this humanitarian crisis.

Following the outbreak of the pandemic, many community members lost their livelihoods, primarily in the restaurant and hotel industries which were forced to close. At the height of the crisis, approximately 80% of the households received no income at all. It is estimated that within the past year at least one parent has been unemployed in roughly 50% of the households.

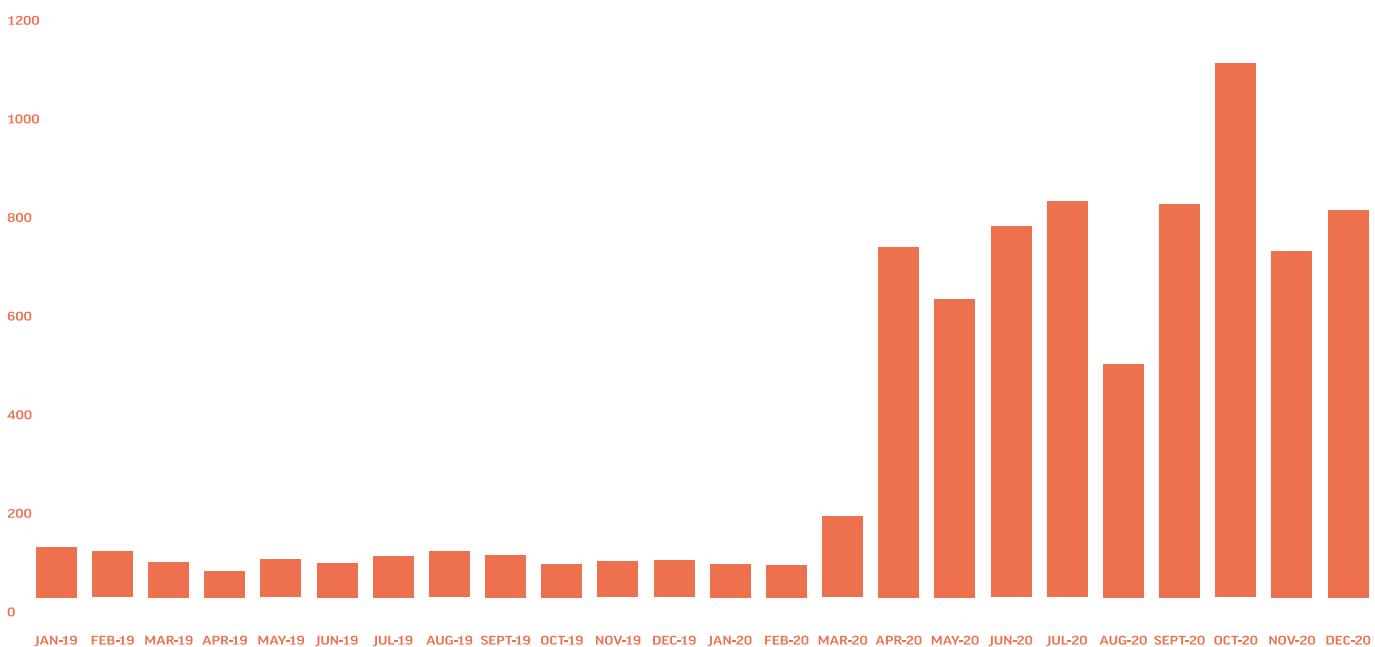
The distress of the loss of livelihoods and lack of savings remains severe, and many families are unable to pay rent, buy food, pay for health insurance and daycares, among other basic needs.

Acute hunger and access to nutritious foods remain formidable challenges within the community; data from a recent community wide survey conducted by Mesila, the "Bon Appetite" program at the Tel Aviv-Yafo Municipality, and the Ministry of Health, revealed that 86.2% of the 500 asylum seekers and other undocumented people surveyed are experiencing moderate or severe food insecurity (starvation).

Asylum seekers are not eligible for unemployment benefits or other government subsidies, and most of them have no savings or family support.

Each day the Mesila team worked to meet the increasing needs. The number of requests for assistance with food, diapers, baby formula, rent, etc. that Mesila received rose by 1,020% compared to the corresponding period in the previous year.

## REQUESTS FOR FINANCIAL ASSISTANCE 2019-2020



## SINCE MARCH AND UNTIL THE END OF DECEMBER, MESILA HAS DISTRIBUTED:

- 12,305 food vouchers – the food vouchers were distributed to Mesila's clients, families and individuals who applied to the Advocacy and Support Center, and to various nonprofit organizations that extend assistance to the community of asylum seekers and undocumented persons.
- 4,357 food packages and meals
- 2,083 diaper packs and baby formulas
- 603 toys arts and crafts kits
- 113 tablets
- 264 school bags, pencil cases, and school equipment
- 683 hygiene packages
- 96 winter packages – blankets, radiators, umbrellas, etc.

This substantial assistance was made possible thanks to donations made by various foundations and private individuals. The donations received were matched by an Emergency Fund established at the Tel Aviv Foundation and Ron Huldai, the Mayor of Tel Aviv-Yafo, immediately following the outbreak of the pandemic.

When faced with extreme cases, the fruitful collaboration with the Tel Aviv Foundation enabled us to provide assistance in the form of rent payments which prevented families from being evicted from their homes, as well as payments for health insurance for children with special needs, and payments for daycares for children at-risk.

Immediately upon the outbreak of the pandemic, Mesila began operating in an emergency mode, which over time has become the norm. Our staff have been working day and night in an attempt to support the most basic needs of the community during this period, predominantly with financial assistance and psychosocial support.

Furthermore, we worked to **make all the pandemic-related information accessible to the community members**. The Community Support team prepared, translated and uploaded all vital information about the pandemic from the Ministry of Health and other government agencies on Mesila's Facebook page, which has become a main channel for resources, news, and updates for the community and organization working in the sector.

Those materials include directives and regulations, notices regarding testing sites, videos and guidelines for parents containing pedagogical content and parental guidance, and more. The information was also circulated in WhatsApp and Telegram groups shared by Mesila staff and amongst key activists from the community.

From March-December, our Advocacy and Support Center received **9,153** applications from community members nationwide (an increase of 261% in the number of applications in comparison with the same period in 2019). 25% of the applications were from asylum seekers living outside of Tel-Aviv (Lod, Ashdod, Haifa, Petach-Tikva and others). The Advocacy and Support Center provided the platform to facilitate massive distributions of direct financial assistance to community members.

Mesila is a key coordinating body responsible for disseminating and facilitating support provided by other institutions. Mesila is an integral part of the Coronavirus Control Center that includes Tel Aviv-Yafo Municipality, Ministry of Health, Home Front Command and Israel National Security Council. Mesila staff joined the Control Center in order to facilitate care for an increasing number of asylum seekers who tested positive for COVID and were sick and in quarantine. Furthermore, Mesila also took on a significant role in the steering committee for governmental and philanthropic financial humanitarian aid, and oversaw the distribution of financial assistance to asylum seekers in Tel Aviv-Yafo.

**Mesila played a critical role establishing the first vaccine center in the world for undocumented people**, in partnership with Sourasky Medical Center-Ichilov Hospital, the Tel Aviv-Yafo Municipality, and the Ministry of Health. We recruited linguistic/cultural mediators to work at the vaccine center ,and prepared numerous informational materials designed to encourage the community members to get vaccinated

Mesila's various departments (Children at-Risk, Children with Special Needs and their Families, The National Center for Survivors of Human Trafficking and Slavery) maintained ongoing telephone contact with all clients during the pandemic, and since May have returned to in person meetings. The other departments have pivoted activities to abide by COVID-19 restrictions, combining online guidance with limited in person activities.

The students who work at the Paramedical Treatment Center provided online therapy to children, and in September transitioned back to in person therapy. The therapeutic playroom also transitioned to an online platform- three booklets and two reading books were translated into Tigrinya, English and Arabic, games were adapted, and play kits were distributed to families. Towards the end of 2020, the individual and group therapy sessions reopened in the playroom.

All the while, we were constantly engaged in addressing the challenges seen on the ground. For example, one of the repercussions of the COVID-19 crisis was the dramatic increase in unaccompanied children wandering the streets of South Tel Aviv during all hours of the day and night. In response, we opened a youth center for children in a neighborhood municipal building in South Tel Aviv. A Mesila social worker and community worker began outreach activities with children in the nearby parks, and patrolled the parks at night to familiarize themselves with the children, and identify the risks.

To provide a holistic response to the critical food insecurity in the community, we are promoting the establishment of the very first food bank in South Tel-Aviv, which will provide the community a central and stable location to access nutritious foods and increase nutrition education and awareness. The food bank will be open 3 days a week and will serve 1,000 of the most vulnerable families from the community, with a focus on single mothers.

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## ORI HALEVY, A COMMUNITY SOCIAL WORKER AT THE ADVOCACY AND SUPPORT CENTER, SHARES HER EXPERIENCES OVER THE PAST YEAR:

My job as a community social worker at Mesila is typically characterized by long-term projects, comprehensive research on the needs of the community of asylum seekers and undocumented people in Tel Aviv-Yafo, and ongoing efforts to devise ways to meet the changing needs of the community. Due to the pandemic, the nature of my work was totally transformed when boarded the 'high-speed train' of caring for the community during the pandemic – a train operated by Mesila, and has been unable to stop at any station since it departed.

Overnight, our work became dynamic and unpredictable. Since the outbreak of the pandemic, we are in an unending race to address the enormous hardships that the community members are facing, while adapting our services to the evolving needs.

As soon as reports began emerging about a virus raging somewhere in China, we began thinking about what relevant information should be conveyed to the community members, who do not typically partake in Israeli media. We wanted to make the information accessible, and that is what we have done since the outbreak of the pandemic.

When the first lockdown was imposed in the middle of March, we worked to meet the most basic needs of the most marginalized community in the country - who are disenfranchised and lack support systems. Each day was new, we had to identify the most critical and pressing problems and provide an immediate and relevant response to them: circulating clear information in a number of languages, which involved cultural mediation, recruiting volunteers and activists in the community for different tasks, delivering food from home to home, organizing recreational activities for the children, guiding and supporting the community in coping with the emotional stress, and much more. We worked at an accelerated pace and our adrenalin levels were sky high, which helped overcome the fear and anxiety that often reappeared once I came home to my family at the end of the day.

When community members started testing positive for Coronavirus, we painstakingly gathered each and every name so we could call those who were ill or were in quarantine and ask them how they were feeling, in addition to providing support and food. I remember one case in particular. A social worker from the Sourasky Medical Center-Ichilov Hospital called and told me about a woman from the community who had tested positive when she came to have her baby delivered. Her husband was immediately sent to quarantine in their home together with their other children, and the woman was separated from the newborn baby and was not allowed to see him. I spoke with the father, who was very distressed. He told me that he and his wife had no information about the condition of the baby. Furthermore, they were not prepared properly for the quarantine and lacked basic items that would be needed when his wife came home from the hospital. It is not easy to bring a baby into the world in a foreign country, with little knowledge of the language, without a family support system, and surely not when the mother has been infected with a virus. It pained me to think about this woman who had been separated from her baby and her husband and was left all alone. We mobilized quickly and managed to provide most of their needs and ease, if only a little, the complexity and difficulty of the situation.

As time elapsed, our work became increasingly intense. In June, we joined the establishment of a municipal control center and became an integral part of the operations. Our close acquaintance with the community was critical to locating and assisting those who were ill or had to be in quarantine. It was also critical to our ability to convey the frequently changing restrictions and procedures to the community. It was important to us to speak personally with the hundreds of people who were sick and offer them support and assistance. Those were very long days at the office, when the line between day and night was often blurred. But I felt that our work was vital and of unparalleled importance.

Our regular work also continued with the thousands of community members who were financially affected by the pandemic. Throughout the year, Mesila's offices remained open for distributing food and other financial-related assistance because countless families lost their livelihoods, and their troubles only multiplied as they were not eligible for any government assistance. Since the start of the pandemic, dozens of people have lined up in front of our offices every day. All of them are facing tremendous hardships and are in need of assistance. One particular meeting was heartbreaking for me. We were approached by a single mother with three small children who was fired from her job at the outbreak of the pandemic. She had not been working for nine months and her landlord threatened to evict them as she was unable to pay the rent. I felt that the assistance we could provide was very meager given the woman's difficult situation, and that filled me with despair. However, coupled with those feelings, there are many days when I brim with pride because our door is always open to the community and many people come to us and find an answer to their hardship and pain. I also draw strength from the activists and leaders in the community who, despite their own personal difficulties, have been contributing their time and energy for many long months in order to help the members of their community, and do so in an inspiring way.

**In addition to dealing with the current state of emergency, we have continued the whole time to assess the needs of the community in all areas of their lives - applying a great degree of creativity and flexibility in order to predict what challenges lie ahead and what steps we may need to take next.**

**TO VOLUNTEER OR DONATE DRY FOOD / DIAPERS /  
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**PLEASE CONTACT:**

**MESILA@MAIL.TEL-AVIV.GOV.IL**

**WE ARE UNFORTUNATELY UNABLE TO ACCEPT DONATIONS OF CLOTHES OR TOYS**