

## ACCESS TO REHABILITATION SERVICES IN CASES OF HUMANITARIAN RISK

The new coronavirus disease (COVID-19), which first appeared in Wuhan city in Hubei state of China at the end of 2019, was declared as a pandemic by the World Health Organization on March 12, 2020. COVID-19 spread very swiftly and posed serious physical, mental and social threats for the whole of humanity. Hearing-impaired individuals were among the groups that faced the hardest challenges in terms of access to health services during the pandemic.

This research report was issued with the support of Etkiniz EU Program and by the Hearing-Impaired and Their Families Association in order to reveal the access level of the hearing-impaired individuals living in Istanbul during the pandemic to health and education services. Families of 149 hearing-impaired individuals were reached through the questionnaire prepared for the research. In addition, interviews were held with five rehabilitation centers and six hearing centers.

The hearing impaired could not access rehabilitation services for three months during the COVID-19 pandemic and certain institutions tried to manage the process by communicating with students and their families via remote education programs. However, families noted in private interviews we conducted that children with special needs could not focus their attention on the screen. In addition, students who are constantly on the move since special areas are not adequate had trouble comprehending the education provided. Moreover, only certain rehabilitation centers, which closed down for three months, organized remedial training sessions. The persons with disabilities had serious problems accessing health services during the pandemic. According to the results of the questionnaires we conducted, the majority of the families could not benefit from hospital services. They could not even get appointments. Many hearing-impaired individuals lagged behind fitting services during these times and could not configure their devices. Again, rehabilitation centers that had to close down had difficulties in paying their rent and covering their costs. Further, two of the centers we interviewed had to apply for bank loans to pay the wages of their employees. When we interviewed the managers of these institutions, many noted that they could not endure another

lockdown. It is of utmost importance to swiftly take measures to compensate for the damage and loss hearing-impaired individuals suffered in terms of access to education and health services during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Along with measures directly targeting this group, additional measures for ensuring that the companies they receive services from can continue

offering such services should be taken and

the needs of the hearing-impaired should be considered while establishing plans for preventing the spread of COVID-19.