

Jewish Social Service Agencies and Effective and Impactful Community Relations

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A strong, vibrant, and caring Jewish social service system as well as its individual agencies should do the following:

- assure that the local health and human service needs of the Jewish and broader community are addressed effectively and efficiently
- bring together the diverse populations and institutions of the community to jointly plan, coordinate, and advocate for the health and human service needs of its residents
- foster an environment in which a vital Jewish community flourishes and enjoys amicable, respectful relations with the people and institutions in government, the business community, and the nonprofit sector of the broader pluralistic society

These objectives are particularly important in light of demographic changes that may lessen the Jewish community's ability to achieve programmatic, public policy, and government funding goals on its own. Similarly, increased reliance on government support requires Jewish social service agencies to be responsive to the needs of the people served in local communities. It is widely believed that government officials will be more responsive to requests and concerns if we are actively engaged with other ethnic and religious groups and if they are informed about the contribution that Jewish social service agencies make to the life of the whole community.

DEMOGRAPHIC CHANGES

The Jewish community is becoming more geographically dispersed, as the concentration of the Jewish population in major U.S. cities is diminishing. As documented in the 2000–2001 National Jewish Population Study—conducted under the aegis of the Jewish Federations of North America (formerly United Jewish Communities)—there has been substantial migration from the Northeast and Midwest to the South and the West; this trend has likely continued since the beginning of this century. Many large urban areas have seen a decrease in the numbers of people who identify themselves as Jewish.

Within a number of major metropolitan and suburban areas, there is significant immigration of foreign-born individuals, which has increased the diversity of the community and reduced the influence of the Jewish community. New York City epitomizes this trend. In 2008, New York City had 8.36 million residents,

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of whom more than 3 million were foreign born and more than 25% had arrived since the year 2000. This population speaks more than 200 languages. Based on UJA-Federation's most recent Jewish Population Study there are only approximately 1 million Jews residing in New York City, a significant reduction from previous surveys.

RELIANCE ON GOVERNMENT FUNDING

Before the advent of Medicaid and Medicare in the late 1960s as part of President Lyndon Johnson's Great Society, Jewish social service agencies were relatively small, funded primarily through Jewish philanthropy, and focused their service delivery on the Jewish community. Over the past 40 years government funding has increased exponentially and provided the financial means to expand services to the broader community consistent with our faith values. The expansion of programs since the Great Society has also increased the ability of Jewish social service agencies to serve members of our own community. Today, Jewish social service agencies provide culturally competent care and assistance to the greater community while maintaining their traditional role of caring for the Jewish community.

For today's Jewish social service agencies, government support is almost always significant and can represent up to 90% of their total revenue. Often, they are among the most respected providers in the community based on management and program excellence. Their high performance is often attributed to the support they receive from the Jewish community. Because of this excellence government often seeks out Jewish social service agencies for assistance in meeting the needs of the community.

That said, there are few issues today where the Jewish community as the Jewish community can approach government and request direct assistance. Perhaps the last such time was when our community resettled large numbers of Jewish refugees from the former Soviet Union. In more recent times, most of our program requests help Jewish social service agencies serve the Jewish and the broader community, whether it be for aging, mental health, developmental disability, child welfare, or youth services. These government funding requests require coalition building as a prerequisite to an effective advocacy effort.

STRATEGIES FOR COMMUNITY INVOLVEMENT

Jewish social service agencies benefit from being involved in the life of their community. Often, the local Jewish federation and Jewish community relations council have developed relationships with religious and ethnic groups in the community through coalitions and other community-building activities, and these relationships are available to Jewish social service agencies. However helpful these relationships may be, they are not sufficient to ensure that Jewish community social service agencies are rooted and respected in the communities they serve.

Relationships are earned and must be nurtured over time. Jewish social service agencies must develop and deepen these relationships through their own initiative. To do so, the executive leadership of each Jewish social service agency must make the building of community relationships a priority objective for the

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organization. Each Jewish social service agency should identify a lead person responsible for coordinating this effort, and staff throughout the organization should be involved and empowered to take on the community relations challenge.

To deepen these relationships requires the development of a community relations plan. It should identify key institutions and community members with whom relationships need to be nurtured and should give outreach assignments to staff people who know and are connected to the local community. For instance, local program directors rather than central administrative staff should be invested with the authority and responsibility to implement the community relations plan. Meaningful results may not be immediate, however. It can take three to five years for enduring relationships and trust to fully evolve.

An effective outreach effort should build relationships with the following groups:

- ethnic, religious, and civic leaders
- elected officials and their appointees
- health and human service organizational leadership
- community and school boards
- colleges and universities
- advocacy and service coalitions

Relationship building is complex, and for each of these target groups it is important to identify potential areas of common interest. For example, elected officials share our interest in serving the poor and vulnerable and are often approached by needy residents for assistance. Jewish social service agencies have programs that serve this population and are in a position to offer to accept referrals from the offices of elected officials. Doing so will not only improve service delivery but also the process of mutual support will reinforce working relationships over the long term.

Similarly, there are broader concerns like health care, early childhood education, and senior services that are important to the representatives of other ethnic and religious communities. One strategy used very effectively in New York City by its Jewish Community Relations Council is to enhance community relationships by organizing and participating in issue-oriented coalitions that provide members with information on topics of interest and advocate for common needs. Jewish social service agencies may want to provide leadership in similar efforts as an effective way to strengthen their community partnerships.

Most Jewish social service agencies have rooms that can be used as community space. If the space is offered for community use then your agency can become a hub for civic engagement. Active civic participation will involve members of your organization in improving the quality of life for themselves and their neighbors. This will be greatly appreciated by the broader community. Jewish social service agencies should also invite the community to share in their own Jewish cultural and religious traditions to foster better understanding among the broader population. Similarly, Jewish social service agencies should participate in the cultural and religious traditions of other ethnic and religious groups.

Jewish social service agencies have great expertise, and many are both well respected and well resourced, compared with social service agencies evolving

from the ethnic and religious faith traditions of more recent immigrant groups. Through collaboration and technical assistance our community can help these newer organizations succeed and, in the process, build lasting and enduring relationships.

As important as it is to focus on building relationships with current community leadership it is equally important to focus on emerging leaders. These are the individuals who will be major players in the community for the next thirty to forty years. A crucial aspect of any effective community relations plan is the development of avenues for educating these individuals early in their careers. For example, all candidates running for elective office in your community should be invited to meet with your senior and professional leadership so that they can begin to learn about your organization and the Jewish community. Similarly, outreach for orientation purposes to a newly appointed pastor or community organization leader will likely pay significant dividends.

THE LARGER PICTURE

As important as it is for Jewish social service agencies to implement a community relations plan to strengthen their own neighborhood roots and to enhance the standing of their own organization it is at least equally important to understand that the work being done benefits the larger Jewish community as well. Jewish federations and community relations councils are engaged in a larger community relations effort to

- build a unified Jewish community
- promote Jewish concerns by an effective organized community
- support a positive environment for the Jewish community as part of the larger pluralistic society
- engage in community betterment

This effort includes increasing knowledge about and support for issues of concern to the Jewish community, such as support for the State of Israel and combating anti-Semitism.

As such, ideally, the two ongoing community relations efforts will be mutually supporting. The federations and community relations councils can provide technical assistance and access to elected officials and community leaders. The Jewish social service agency as part of its work can help carry the larger Jewish community relations agenda. Marrying these initiatives when appropriate will magnify the success of both efforts.

THE GREAT ECONOMIC RECESSION

Jewish social service agencies are not immune from the effects of the great economic recession. Government and philanthropic funding has and will likely decrease significantly over the next several years. In the best case, maintaining services to the poor and vulnerable in the Jewish and broader community will require existing social service agencies to collaborate, coordinate, and become more efficient. This will be challenging for sure. Smaller Jewish social service agencies may lack the resources to continue to serve the Jewish community as they do presently and may need to partner with other agencies to ensure that members of the Jewish community continue to have their needs met. Larger Jewish

social service agencies, because of their financial strength and ongoing Jewish communal support, are likely to be well positioned to acquire new resources as weaker social service agencies cease operations and government approaches them to continue these important community services. These larger, more financially secure Jewish social service agencies will also grapple with how to continue to serve the Jewish community when there are equally compelling needs in the broader community. These challenges illustrate the need for deft community relations. Those Jewish social service agencies that are trusted community partners will be able to navigate these treacherous times because the broader community will recognize that they are integral parts of the larger community. We are in the midst of a Darwinian narrowing of the social service sector that favors larger, better financed social service agencies. Because the Jewish social service system enters this period in a strong position, it is likely to be a survivor and well positioned to be a larger presence when the economy recovers.

A MODEL APPROACH

UJA-Federation of New York supports a Department of Government and External Relations that assists its network of more than 100 agencies build relationships with elected officials, community leaders, and representatives of the diverse communities of New York to further their mission. In the external relations realm, this department's major goal is not only to build relationships but also to empower Jewish social service agencies to implement and execute their own effective outreach to the diverse constituencies within their catchment area. In this regard, the department often relies on the expertise and relationships of the Jewish Community Relations Council of New York and the Westchester Jewish Council.

For example, because of term limits, there has been a complete turnover in membership on the New York City Council. As a result, the number of Jewish legislators has significantly declined, reflecting our community's reduced numbers. Many of these newly elected representatives were not familiar with the Jewish community and its social service agencies.

UJA-Federation took the leadership to organize meetings for Jewish social service agencies (including community centers and councils) with all candidates running for City Council in neighborhoods with a significant agency presence. These meetings encouraged mutual education and understanding and created a framework for ongoing collaboration. Once a candidate was elected the local Jewish social service agency was well positioned to nurture a mutually beneficial relationship.

Similarly, UJA-Federation and its social service agencies participate in many broadly constituted human service coalitions that seek to maximize resources for the poor and vulnerable. Through these coalitions Jewish social service agencies have built relationships with diverse community and social service sector leaders that have enabled a unified approach to elected officials on behalf of those in the Jewish and broader community.

As these very difficult economic times persist we see value in the external relations efforts. UJA-Federation and its network of agencies have access to a broad range of elected officials and participate with the broader community on behalf of its own needs and the needs of all New Yorkers.

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CONCLUSION

It is in the interests of Jewish social service agencies to pursue an active community relations agenda that builds relationships with the entire spectrum of leadership in the community served. To achieve optimum benefit to the Jewish community and their own organizations, this community relations work should be closely coordinated with Jewish federations and community relations councils, which share common purposes. It is crucial that a community relations plan be adopted with agreed-on goals, priorities, strategies, and tactics and with the participation of the board, senior professionals, and line staff of Jewish social service agencies.

A well-implemented community relations plan will be of great benefit and enhance an agency's ability to provide quality social services to the Jewish and broader community. It will also enhance the stature of the agency and ensure that when needed it can call on community leaders, elected officials, philanthropists, government funders, and others in furtherance of its mission.

