

A Community Revitalized, A City Rediscovered: The New Orleans Jewish Community Two Years Post-Katrina

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In the two years since Katrina, the New Orleans Jewish community has transformed disaster into opportunity and thus can serve as a model for postdisaster recovery. Made possible by the generous support from the American Jewish community and the increased sense of cohesion after Katrina, New Orleans lay and professional leadership are guiding the recovery of the community through a strategic planning process in which hundreds of community members have participated.

The Jewish community of New Orleans has used the two years since Hurricane Katrina not only to recover from the devastation but also to plot the course for what it hopes will be a future renaissance, thereby transforming disaster into opportunity. In the process, the Jewish Federation of Greater New Orleans, despite turnover in its executive director, campaign director, and planning director positions, has clearly emerged as the central address for the Jewish community.

When the levees breached in late August, 2005, the resulting floods damaged 80% of the homes and 70% of the businesses owned by the 10,000 members of the New Orleans Jewish community. In addition, the campus that housed the New Orleans Jewish Day School, the offices of the Federation, and the Metairie Jewish Community Center took in water, as did two synagogues. In addition, Beth Israel Congregation in the hardest-hit Lakeview area was flooded and needed to be completely gutted, its Torahs and sacred books buried. All told, Jewish communal institutions suffered \$20 million in damages.

In the most massive relocation of U.S.

citizens since the Dust Bowl of the 1930s, all of New Orleans' residents evacuated and set up temporary residence elsewhere. Members of the Jewish community ended up resettling in more than 70 communities across the country, and one-third would decide not to return to their New Orleans homes. The Jewish Federation, its IT system tattered, set up operations in the conference room of the Houston Jewish Federation (see article by Lee Wunsch in this issue).

How did the New Orleans Jewish lay and professional leadership rebuild its community when its leaders and members were scattered across the country and one-third of its pre-Katrina population would decide not to return, its infrastructure was damaged, its professional staff and volunteers were themselves victims of the disaster, and its ultimate fate depended on circumstances outside its control—for example, the strength of the levees and the effectiveness of government at all levels?

In the space of just two years, the New Orleans Jewish community, as shown by both concrete indicators—its just-concluded Annual Campaign nearly reached its

pre-Katrina total, despite a greatly reduced donor base—and the intangible indicators of community cohesion and resolve, is being transformed. This article describes the recovery process since Katrina, which has been guided by the recently completed strategic planning process in which several hundred community members have participated.

PHASES OF RECOVERY AND TRANSFORMATION

Pikuach Nefesh: Saving Lives

In the first few days after Hurricane Katrina, *pikuach nefesh*, the Jewish concept of the sanctity of a human life, was the Jewish Federation's first priority. The Federation staff, in its temporary Houston office, was deluged with calls from frantic relatives, begging them to rescue their stranded relatives. Adam Bronstone, then the Planning Director, working closely with the East Baton Rouge Sheriff Department and the National Guard, used this information to direct the rescuers to the homes of stranded Jews. With the help of United Jewish Communities as well as these first responders, the Federation arranged for the evacuation to Houston of 300 residents of the Jewish nursing home, Woldenberg Village. Unfortunately, two residents died en route.

With the completion of this rescue activity, the staff and volunteers turned their attention to locating the scattered residents of the New Orleans Jewish community. An online database was set up on the Jewish Federation's Web site containing current contact information for members of the Jewish community; it was updated daily. This database made it possible not only for neighbors and friends to contact each other but for the Federation to publicize informational meetings it was holding in communities in which large numbers of Jewish New Orleanians had resettled. At these meetings, the Federation shared important information about insurance issues and other resources to help in recovery.

Within the first month after the levee

breaches, Eric Stillman, then the Federation executive director, Adam Bronstone, and several synagogue staff members traveled by helicopter to assess the damage to Jewish facilities in the still-flooded city. Fortunately, the synagogues and the Jewish Community Center building in the Uptown area were spared major damage.

The Jewish Community Partnership, funded by United Jewish Communities, was created in Baton Rouge, where the Jewish community had tripled in size overnight. The Baton Rouge Federation, staffed by a single part-time professional, joined forces with the New Orleans Federation and the Jewish Endowment Foundation of New Orleans to meet the housing, job, and social service needs of the burgeoning community. A satellite office of Jewish Family Services was set up in Baton Rouge to deliver needed services.

Return to New Orleans and Initial Recovery

By January 2006, the Federation had returned to its New Orleans office, both JCC facilities had reopened, and community life was beginning again. The priorities for the Federation in this phase were to facilitate the return of New Orleanians to their home, to serve as the conduit for financial aid that flowed into the community, and to coordinate the efforts of the many Jewish volunteers coming from across the country to help gut and renovate flooded homes.

The Jewish communal infrastructure was sustained by more than \$20 million in donations from the United Jewish Communities, the umbrella of the North American federation system, and from the national religious movements, along with donations from hundreds of individual synagogues, Federations, and donors. The Jewish Federation, together with UJC, worked out procedures to allocate these funds to every Jewish agency, organization, and synagogue in New Orleans. And in one application of the Golden Rule—"he who holds the gold rules"—because the Federation was giving out the money that enabled every Jewish

institution to survive, it necessarily gained greater importance as the central convenor.

These funds were also allocated to Jewish residents in several ways. Every Jewish adult was eligible to receive a one-time grant of \$700 after filling out a simple application. In addition, returnees were eligible for grants to reimburse them for moving expenses as well as housing renovation and business loans. Jewish Family Services administered these grants and loans to individuals.

During this phase, which lasted until about the first anniversary of Katrina, the Federation also began planning how to attain self-sufficiency, as the UJC funds were slated to end in December 2007.

Renaissance

The central focus of the second post-Katrina year was to plan how New Orleans could go beyond recovery to transformation.

Michael Weil, a strategic planner drawn from Israel to become executive director of the Jewish Federation of Greater New Orleans in October 2006, expressed this challenge well: "There is no sense in going back to where we were before the storm. We have the opportunity now to make past dreams and new dreams of a vibrant Jewish New Orleans come true."

This effort has been guided by a strategic planning process involving five task forces and hundreds of community members that culminated in a new strategic plan for the next five years and estimated to cost \$30 million.

Focusing on these challenges—adapting the service system to a community reduced in size, responding to the needs of outlying communities, financially sustaining the community infrastructure, increasing collaboration and avoiding duplication, and most importantly, attracting newcomers to increase the size of the population—the task forces, augmented by focus groups and a community-wide gathering, underwent a nine-month process of deliberating and de-

veloping recommendations for implementation. It used the SWOT (strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats) process to guide its fact-finding and deliberations. The plan's recommendations are also informed by a demographic study conducted in the summer of 2007.

The plan is geared to implement what it terms this "realistic vision":

The New Orleans Jewish community will recover and through the united efforts of all Jewish institutions, increase its population, and enhance the quality of Jewish life by providing opportunities for interpersonal, educational, spiritual, and economic growth. This will transform the New Orleans Jewish community into the most successful, vibrant and culturally rich intermediate size Jewish community in North America—and attractive to young Jewish families.

Its 12 strategic thrusts, to be implemented by 54 recommendations, are as follows:

1. Rebuild the population by attracting by newcomers and engaging students.
2. Maintain ties with those who have left.
3. Sustain and nurture our rich human resources.
4. Keep the community together while recognizing neighborhood needs.
5. Retain the high level of engagement and involvement.
6. Sustain high levels of collaboration.
7. The Day School and Jewish education are important components of the community.
8. Have frequent and transparent internal communication.
9. Aggressive external PR and brand NOLA as a pioneering, exciting, and fun community of opportunities.
10. Expand local fundraising opportunities.
11. Fundraise outside the community.
12. New Orleans as a Jewish People project and a model of postdisaster community recovery.

The strategic plan's flagship program, a newcomer package of grants and incentives designed to realize the plan's top priority,

has already been launched. Based, in part, on the *sal klita*, the absorption benefits basket offered to Israeli newcomers to spur aliyah, and publicized by an Israeli PR firm engaged on a pro bono basis, the package includes the following incentives:

- Moving grant of up to \$3,000
- Interest-free housing or business loans of up to \$15,000 each
- Rental assistance of up to \$2,500
- Job search networking and business networking
- Reduced tuition in the New Orleans Jewish Day School
- Free JCC, synagogue, Hadassah, and National Council of Jewish Women membership for one year

Newcomers are also matched up with buddy families who can introduce them to the nuances of New Orleans life.

Early evidence suggests that this effort is working. About 150 newcomers, mostly idealistic young Jews, have applied to the program, and many have already moved to the city.

In addition, the Federation has capitalized on the increased spirit of community cohesion to encourage centralization of services, sharing space, and other efficiencies.

Beth Israel, the Modern Orthodox synagogue, is now *davening* in the chapel at the Reform Congregation Gates of Prayer. The regional office of the ADL now shares Federation office space. And talks were held to consider collaboration between the community day and the Chabad-affiliated day school. In addition, a grant writer secured by the Federation has worked to secure funds for synagogues and agencies as well.

CONCLUSION

Out of the disaster of Katrina has arisen a smaller, but more cohesive, committed, and revitalized Jewish community. The key ingredients for this transformation have been (1) the overwhelming generosity of the American Jewish community, which has provided the funds to sustain the organized Jewish community in the two years since Katrina and (2) the professional and lay leadership who have used the opportunity provided by that generous support to build for a future when the New Orleans Jewish community will stand on its own two feet again.

As it continues to rebuild, New Orleans Jewish community can serve as a model of postdisaster recovery.