

Collaboration and Inter-Agency Planning for Teen Programming

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For many years, the Jewish Community Centers (JCC) of MetroWest, New Jersey, operated one of the most dynamic and comprehensive teen departments in the Center field. Relationships were developed with congregations and youth-serving organizations that provided programs to larger audiences and created avenues of engagement for many Jewish teens. But this success took a great leap forward when the United Jewish Federation of MetroWest created the Advisory Committee on Teens (ACT) to study teen services and programs in the community. Their study resulted in a community-wide initiative, Teen Initiative for Maximum Engagement (TIME), that is transforming the way in which synagogues and agencies provide programs for Jewish teens.

Synagogue Partnerships

The core of the program is enabling selected synagogues to engage a qualified youth professional to work with the teen population of the congregation. The goal is not simply to strengthen the synagogue youth group(s), but to reach out to all the teens of the congregation and connect them to Jewish activities. Synagogues are required to maintain their current level of funding in their initial year of participation and increase their funding in years two and three. The community funds the additional portion of the youth worker's compensation, including health benefits.

The program is based on two pilot projects that developed at the request of area synagogues and proved so successful that the concept was expanded. In planning the expansion of the program, key rabbis in the community met to understand both the costs and benefits to participating congregations. Initially four congregational youth programs were enrolled, and by

the second year the number increased to six. A key element of the program is that the congregational youth committee is involved in engaging and supervising the youth workers. The workers are expected to facilitate committee meetings and assist in developing the agenda, as well as report to the committee about activities and concerns. Another element is that the funding does not come to the synagogue; the worker is paid through the Jewish Community Center. The synagogue portion is sent to the JCC for disbursement. Thus, the funding relationship between the Federation and the agency is maintained, with the synagogues as the beneficiary.

Agency Partnerships

The most exciting component of the program is the relationships with Federation-funded agencies, allowing the synagogue youth workers to be full-time employees in the community. With one exception, the synagogue positions were half-time, and the ACT committee realized that only by creating full-time positions could the caliber of professionalism be advanced. Meetings were held with Federation-funded agency executives to elicit their participation in providing additional hours and jobs for the youth workers. Several positions were developed within the Jewish Community Center, Jewish Education Association—Central Hebrew High School and Young Judaea. In all, a total of seven full-time professional positions were created, allowing the community to engage trained, promising young workers who can live in the community and remain for more than a year or two. As with the synagogue youth workers, the shared staff are supervised by the staff of the agency where they are working.

In addition to funding youth-worker positions, the agencies are part of the Professional Advisory Committee that meets periodically to review the TIME program and plan additional activities. As a result of this process, the Jewish Family Service and Jewish Education Association created a half-time position called *Mitzvah* Manager, to promote *tzedakah* and community service in congregational schools. This program will also include developing community-wide social action programming for younger students.

Supervision, Training and Support

All of the TIME professionals are supervised by the Director of the TIME Initiative and meet as a group and individually to deal with issues, review activities and plan community-wide programs. The TIME Director is a full-time staff member of the Jewish Community Center and is supervised by the Assistant Executive Director of the JCC. A community-wide committee oversees the TIME program and includes members from ACT, the participating synagogues and agencies, community professionals and consultants.

Supervision of the youth professionals by the TIME Director provides a level of support and training that most synagogues have been unable to offer. Because the youth professional is employed in the community full-time, hours for supervision and training are planned into the work schedule. Supervision is then a key component of the job, as opposed to something that both the worker and supervisor “find” time to do. The TIME Director is always aware of needs in more than one setting and can plan group activities for training and support. Since the TIME Director as well as several youth workers are JCC employees, cooperation and collaboration with the JCC Teen Department is available and desirable. Thus, a cadre of professional youth workers is emerging with full-time employment, appropriate compensation and benefits and adequate training and support for personal and professional growth.

Community-Wide Programming

This group of professional youth workers is the nucleus of the Jewish youth community. They work with a significant portion of the Jewish teens in MetroWest who are engaged in Jewish youth activities. They serve in synagogues that span the geography of the community and represent the religious and cultural

diversity of the community. As a group, they provide teens channel of access to community agencies that serve specific needs of Jewish teens, such as Jewish Family Service or Jewish Vocational Service. They can mobilize a significant number of Jewish teens for community activities such as Super Sunday, and they can identify broader needs of Jewish teens as reflected by the populations they serve.

The TIME project is intended to meet some of the needs of all the youth programs in the community. Advisor University is a training format to assist youth workers in acquiring skills and information to enhance their individual programs. The full-time workers are involved in planning the sessions and are always in attendance. This guarantees that sessions will be held even if only a few of the part-time professionals can attend.

One of the needs of smaller youth programs is finding opportunities for their participants to join with other groups for programming that is cost effective only with larger numbers. The full-time workers and their teens often form the core of such a program, with smaller groups invited to take advantage of the activity. All youth programs occasionally have problems with facilities. The partnership with the JCC provides access to the JCC for large group synagogue-based youth programs that would not normally have such access.

One of the programs that has been offered through the TIME project is a national pilot project to train Jewish teens in marketing and communications. The goal of the program is to equip Jewish teens involved in Jewish youth programs with the skills to engage uninvolved teens. Due to the TIME project, the community was invited by JESNA to be a pilot site for the Peer Networking program. Staff of the TIME project administer and support the Peer Networking program, and the full-time youth professionals recruited the initial participants. JESNA contracted with the Acharei Institute of Brandeis University to develop the curriculum, and thus the youth community was the recipient and beneficiary of an exemplary program that would otherwise have been difficult to implement.

Future Goals and Objectives

There are additional youth servicing agencies and organizations that will become part of the TIME project in the months ahead. There are two Jewish day high schools in the community, an Orthodox youth program not based in a synagogue, and a community youth program with only small groups in MetroWest. There are also many more synagogues that could benefit from participation in the project. Other plans include creating a Program Resource Center for teens and youth workers and more community-wide programs, including community service projects. A website for Jewish teens, with information about a wide range of programs and services, will be developed. The first year of the TIME project has demonstrated significant benefits in improving the quality of Jewish youth work in the community. Preliminary feedback from the participating congregations and agencies has been very positive. There is greater investment in services and programs for Jewish teens not only in the synagogues but in the agencies as well. Lay leaders in synagogues are beginning to interact with each other and with the broader Jewish community. Careful evaluation of both intended and unintended outcomes is still to be done, but there is a different, more positive environment for Jewish youth work than existed previously.

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