

An Advocacy Coalition of Older Persons*

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The need for and importance of advocacy and self involvement by older persons on their own behalf in cities and counties throughout the nation is increasingly evident. The current assault(s) . . . on programs . . . underscores the need for mobilization of the elderly. . . .

THE need for the active involvement of older and retired persons in public affairs and legislative matters has long been apparent. It has perhaps never been greater than now when funding for social services is being slashed, gutting the programs on which older people depend for their very survival. Older persons, perhaps more than any other age group, are dependent upon the action of government for the delivery of income and life-sustaining services.

It is the policy-makers of the Federal government in Washington who determine the older person's Social Security income, access to health care through Medicare, the health insurance program for the elderly, and the availability of public funds for senior programs such as those funded through the Older Americans Act. It is State, County and Municipal governments which provide and administer senior centers, mental health services, rent control programs, supplementary and emergency grants, home care, nursing home care, and protective services. The character and quality of government administration and the provision of services are therefore a matter of great concern to older people and their families.

As has been amply recorded, the number and proportion of elderly persons are rapidly increasing. The elderly

comprise more than 13 percent of the Jewish population. It is a long lived cohort with one-third over 75 years of age and about 10 percent over 85. By the year 2000, less than 20 years away, greater longevity will undoubtedly increase the number of old in our population to 15 or 18 percent. This generation of Jewish elderly include many poor and low-income people. In any case, when extended medical, institutional and long term home care are needed, the personal resources of most middle-income people are not equal to their extraordinary cost. The government social insurance programs have become a near universal necessity for the elderly of every income level, except perhaps the most well-to-do.

Older persons know their problems. They vote in large numbers and are the best resource to speak on their own behalf. It is essential, therefore, that older adults have the opportunity to participate as citizens in the development of public policy and legislation in order to preserve and enhance their quality of life. Social agencies can play a significant role in facilitating this involvement.

This article will outline the experience of JASA (The Jewish Association for Services for the Aged) and the Jewish community of New York, in this area of senior citizen advocacy.

JASA is a comprehensive social service agency providing casework, group work, recreational programs and housing to the elderly throughout the five boroughs of New York City and Nassau

* Presented at the Annual Meeting of The Association of Jewish Family and Children's Agencies, Boston, April 18, 1983.

and Suffolk Counties. It was organized in 1968 and now serves over 50,000 elderly persons annually. JASA is a member agency of the Federation of Jewish Philanthropies of Greater New York.

JASA initiated the Joint Public Affairs Committee for Older Adults (herein referred to as JPAC) in June 1977. JASA assumed this responsibility as the lead organization for the agencies affiliated with the Federation of Jewish Philanthropies of Greater New York.

JPAC is a social action coalition of older adult representatives of more than 100 senior centers throughout metropolitan New York. Through a network of local social action committees within each center, older adult participants become informed and educate legislators on the needs and priorities of elderly New Yorkers. Such social action consists of people working together to achieve a common goal or to attack a common problem. It is usually an ad hoc, short-lived activity. Our purpose has been to make it an ongoing part of senior center activity.

JPAC evolved from a public affairs committee of older adult members of JASA's Advisory Council. The program was conceived in 1977, when New York City Rent Control laws were due to expire. The members of the Advisory Council wanted to publicly support the extension of Rent Control because the elderly of New York depend upon these laws to keep their rents affordable. Members of the JASA Board, however, many of whom represent real estate concerns, were opposed to Rent Control laws. Hence, it was accepted that a public affairs committee of older adult constituents of JASA should be organized, independent of the Board and able to take public positions in its own name.

A small grant from the Brookdale Foundation provided a full-time program coordinator to organize and staff a

larger advocacy program of older adult representatives of senior centers of JASA, YM-YWHA's and other Federation-affiliated organizations. A JASA Board Trustee with an interest in public affairs assumed an active volunteer role as chairperson of the Committee.

For the next two-and-a-half years the program was staffed by the one program coordinator (the author), who focused on organizing senior centers under Jewish auspices. In January, 1980, the funding was assumed by a New York city governmental agency. Staffing expanded and many new senior centers under diverse sponsorship joined the coalition as program visibility concomitantly increased.

JPAC aims to stimulate increased community interest in the problems of the elderly. We aim to assist older persons to become active advocates on their own behalf in order to achieve a more responsible income, health and social service delivery system for the aged. We aim to present government officials and legislators with the voice of a strong, larger, organized coalition, whose members are visible as a constituency with special needs of their own.

To accomplish these goals, JPAC utilizes senior centers, senior clubs, and even nursing homes, as the vehicle to organize older persons on the local level.

A social action committee (SAC) is organized within each affiliated senior center to discuss legislative issues of concern to center members, to discuss local action strategies related to identified priorities, and to mobilize center members for large advocacy campaigns in concert with other groups. Advocacy projects include letter-writing campaigns, meetings with elected or other government officials, local campaigns such as obtaining the installation of a traffic light, crime prevention program or store discount, participation by senior

center members in a public rally, a trip to City Hall, State or Federal capitols; preparation and presentation of public testimony, and others.

The SAC meets at least monthly, is comprised of 10–15 older adult senior center members, and is co-chaired by two older adults. The co-chairs, known as “JPAC REPS”, represent center members at citywide JPAC meetings and other community groups. All SAC activities are coordinated with senior center personnel, who must support and be involved in the planning and implementation of all JPAC-related activities in their centers, in order for the program to be effective.

Through involvement in social action, participants are afforded social and psychological benefits beyond the immediate goals of the program. Participants have the opportunity to develop and exercise leadership skills and to enhance their status and sense of self worth. In fact, our experience has shown that people never before involved in this type of activity relish the stimulation and experience. It is an activity that even attracts men (who are usually most difficult to involve in typical senior activities).

A central JPAC committee, comprised of two older adult representatives from each affiliated senior center, meets bi-monthly. Committee meetings provide a forum for center representatives to share ideas and concerns from the local centers, and to coordinate and initiate collective action by all centers. Meeting agendas include guest speakers who stimulate in-depth discussions on program policy and legislative issues of concern to the elderly. As an aside, we always serve lunch at meetings, to support attendance.

JPAC staff provides technical assistance to the local committees, coordinates the work of the local and central committees, and issues an *Action Memo*.

The *Memo* informs, educates and provides continuity to the organization. It serves as the vehicle for communication between central JPAC, local SACs, and the elderly community-at-large. The *Memo* updates legislation of concern to older persons. It suggests letter-writing campaigns and other social action strategies on issues which coincide with the sessions of the State and Federal legislatures, or serves as a follow-up to JPAC membership meetings. It is distributed to a larger audience nationwide to include over 1,400 senior centers, government and social service agency staff, and individuals.

In 1981, JPAC began publishing a city-wide newspaper for older persons, which provides information on services, programs and issues relevant to the elderly. The *Senior Citizens Advocate* has a distribution of more than 57,000 senior centers and interested individuals, throughout metropolitan New York.

JPAC staff and older adult representatives attend meetings of many community and city-wide organizations. Through ongoing involvement with other groups and coalitions, JPAC staff and Reps have the opportunity to share resources and ideas.

While working towards satisfying concrete goals, the Joint Public Affairs Committee stimulates the older adult participants to maintain an interest in current affairs which, in turn, helps to keep them healthy, alert and involved. Many participants have testified that their JPAC involvement keeps them alive and gives meaning to their lives.

JPAC has, over the course of six years, engaged the interest of some one hundred communal associations and affiliated groups in New York City, Nassau and Suffolk Counties, with over 40,000 members. We also work with all local, city, and state-wide coalitions. JPAC has succeeded in introducing or amplifying the concept of citizenship

education and social action as tools to strengthen center programming, to make an impact on policy-makers and as an exciting forum of activity.

Under the leadership of JPAC staff, and in coalition with other advocacy groups, JPAC's older adult participants have successfully petitioned public officials to address local community needs such as the installation of traffic lights; to add New York City tax levy dollars to support senior centers; to pass-through the Federal Supplemental Security Income Cost-of-Living Increase to New York State recipients; to increase the New York State share of the Community Services for the Elderly program; and to limit the impact on the elderly of federal budget cuts in Social Security, Title XX, Medicare, Medicaid, S.S.I., Older Americans Act, Low Income Energy Assistance, the Community Services Block Grant, etc. JPAC sponsored two annual Congressional forums on the impact of federal budget cuts on the elderly, and organized five successful trips to Albany, where older adult JPAC Representatives presented their New York State priorities to state legislators and the Governor. Many older adult JPAC Reps have presented public testimony in Washington, Albany and before city agencies; several have spoken on T.V. and radio programs about issues of concern.

Through involvement in JPAC, older people are gaining an appreciation of their potential in contributing to the area of public policy. As the coordinating body of the individual member centers, JPAC has received increasing recognition by senior center members, the political community and the aged. JPAC's staff is consulted with by governmental agency staff, community-based social workers, legislators and their aides on the needs and priorities of older people in New York City.

The need for and importance of advo-

cacy and self-involvement by older persons on their own behalf in locales throughout the nation is increasingly evident. The current assault on the major institutions dealing with older people, coupled with federal budget cuts in programs designed to help older persons remain viable members of society, underscores the need for mobilization of the elderly and organized efforts of advocacy. Who best can define the needs and concerns of this large and diverse group but older persons themselves?

In local communities, the key ingredients for a successful advocacy program include: one or two Board members with an interest in public affairs, the encouragement of the Board and its support of an independent group of older adult constituents who could voice public opinions in their own name, the commitment of senior agency staff, the active involvement of senior center staff, and a few senior citizen leaders. The issues in today's political climate are ready-made. It always helps to start with a small issue with a chance of success. Nothing succeeds and stimulates like success.

JASA, in concert with local Federations and national Jewish organizations, hopes to convene a two-day symposium attended by representatives of local Jewish agencies. The program would include workshops on issues and the how-to's of advocacy among older adults.

In the future, the well-being of the elderly will depend upon an adequate base of financial support for the social insurance programs and health and welfare services required by the aged for their survival. In an American democracy, the elderly, and of course, the Jewish elderly, should be fully involved in ensuring public support for these essential programs. The key leadership of Jewish communal organizations are in a position to support their effort.