

# JEWISH COMMUNITY CENTERS AND THE FEDERATION

## A New Strategic Partnership

ALLAN B. FINKELSTEIN

*Executive Vice President, Jewish Community Centers Association of North America, New York*

*Jewish Community Centers and the federation are the two institutions primarily charged with community-building and as such should pursue a new strategic partnership capable of promoting Jewish identity and education. By working together, they can also enhance communal fund-raising and planning efforts. To ensure the success of the partnership, JCCs and federations must strive to ensure good and timely communication.*

Discussions regarding the evolving and changing relationship between Jewish Community Centers (JCCs) and federations have taken place for a number of years. In the early 1980s, leaders of the Jewish communal field, including Sanford Solender (1980), Ted Kanner (1982), and William Kahn (1984), wrote of the need to consider new models of relating and of enhancing the federation campaign through its work with its constituent agencies. Frankly, one could read those papers today and note how little has changed. Yet, there has been major change in the nature of our communities, especially in terms of the financial realities facing us and the "new," emerging lay leadership. We can no longer simply write papers for journals and discuss the relationship at conferences. It is time for fundamental rethinking about the way federations and JCCs (and all agencies) work together to strengthen Jewish life in North America. What was suggested twenty years ago still holds true—but much more must be addressed.

The relationship between JCCs and the federation must be seen within the larger context of a need for continually evolving models of Jewish communal service, planning, and fund raising that correspond to the current and changing realities of the Jewish and general communities. In constructing these new models, we must begin with the premise that *all Jews* are members/clients or potential members/clients of the

community as a whole, not of individual agencies. Therefore, an essential characteristic of these models has to be increased and sustained cooperation between and among *all* Jewish institutions. Thus, much of what is said here about JCCs and federations also applies to relationships between federations, congregations, and the whole range of Jewish organizations and agencies.

In general, areas of actual conflict between federations and JCCs are less fundamental and less important today than they were in the past. Developments in two critical areas—Jewish continuity and fund raising—exemplify these trends. Since 1982, when the JCC Association (then JWB) began its efforts to maximize the Jewish educational effectiveness of JCCs (COMJEE), Jewish education and identity building have become the primary concern of JCCs and are an increasingly high priority for federations. Federations are providing significant special grants to JCCs for their Jewish continuity efforts as part of overall community initiatives. In addition to continuing to provide annual allocations for operating expenses, federations are providing assistance in the development of capital funds and longer-term endowments.

### THE NEW REALITY

During the past decade or so, we have seen major changes in the attitudes and values of the general and Jewish public regarding

community and belonging. A professor at Harvard recently characterized "bowling alone," reflecting the decline in membership in bowling leagues even while participation in the sport increases, as an example of the declining inclination among Americans to join groups (Putnam, 1995). The 1990 National Jewish Population Survey (NJPS), along with numerous local population studies and much of the planning work done by the JCC Association, has in addition to making us painfully aware of the soaring rates of intermarriage and assimilation, noted the decreasing number of definable Jewish neighborhoods and low rates of affiliation with Jewish institutions.

All of the above factors have been accompanied by decreased or flat giving to federation annual campaigns. In turn federations have, on average, been providing a decreasing percentage of the funds JCCs require for their operations and have been unable to make available the kind of incentive support that existed not so many years ago. This has heightened the need for JCCs to raise more of their own funds, taking energy away from service delivery.

Rather than opening up an area of competition and conflict between JCCs and federations, however, this new philanthropic climate underlines the need for greater cooperation. Federations and JCCs are uniquely positioned to address some of the underlying issues that have contributed to a decline in Jewish giving. These are the two institutions that are primarily charged with community-building within North American Jewry. In order to re-create and strengthen interest in Jewish communal association, they must aggressively pursue a more active and strategic partnership capable of promoting Jewish identity and education. Success in these efforts will in turn enhance the revenues of Jewish institutions and create the flexibility to innovate and grow.

In the context of the allocation of funds, there will unavoidably be personal friction and institutional conflicts. Disputes will in-

evitably arise when JCCs believe that particular federations are becoming too functional, delivering services themselves instead of promoting collaborative efforts between JCCs and other agencies to deal with communal needs. Federations will sometimes raise concerns about accountability in JCCs and the degree to which they are supportive of the campaign. Overwhelmingly, however, the trend and the *communal need* must be less toward these foci and more toward an even greater convergence of interests and cooperation.

### THE TIES THAT BIND US TOGETHER

Most discussions about federation-JCC relations focus on money, but ultimately, the present and future relationship between JCCs and federations is tied more to ideology than to funding. Even today, some JCCs receive less than 10% of their revenues from federations. Some of the key ties that bind us are a shared belief in the critical importance of *Am Eched*, love and concern for one's fellow Jews, and of close bonds between North American and Israeli Jewry. We might have disagreements over structure, but our goals are overwhelmingly the same and can best be achieved strategically and cooperatively.

### Enlarging the Pie

The need to enhance communal fund raising offers an excellent example of how close cooperation between federations and JCCs can benefit all Jewish institutions. As donors become increasingly interested in designated giving, federations need to use the success of JCCs in promoting Jewish identity as part of the case for the federated campaign. JCCs also offer a wide variety of programs and services that appeal to many current and potential federation donors and to those who wish to feel a more specific connection to service delivery.

Federations can and should use JCCs to cultivate donors and leadership more effectively. The JCC provides an excellent

venue for reaching young families in early childhood programs and others who might have no other affiliations or family traditions of making personal contributions to federation. JCC staff can be helpful in identifying prospects and in finding out about donor interests. JCCs need to actively promote the campaign among all of their constituencies, including trustees, staff, members, and program participants. Moreover, the importance of campaign to both the JCC and the Jewish community needs to be continually stressed in the JCC's lay and professional development programs.

For the foreseeable future, federation funding will be a crucial source of support for JCCs. Unrestricted operating support is always the most difficult to secure. In many instances, federation will be best positioned to identify and approach the most prestigious potential donors. Its management of endowment funds through communal foundations often provides a *hechsher* that enables JCCs to secure planned gifts.

#### Planning

Communal planning is another area where a more coordinated approach is crucial. Executives of JCCs and other agencies should be sought out more actively and engaged on an ongoing basis in federation's strategic planning regarding the delivery of community services. In addition to the knowledge and insight they would bring to the process, they would be better positioned to incorporate communal thinking into their own planning processes and to interpret long-range plans and priorities to their laypeople. Federation must plan *with* the JCC and other agencies, *not for* them. In turn, as JCCs do more internal strategic planning, they must, of course, integrate communal planning and work closely with federation. The greater involvement of JCC leaders in communal planning will also create new opportunities for mutual discussions about the JCC's work and achievements outside the allocations process.

#### Building Jewish Community and Fostering Jewish Continuity

The JCC has demonstrated its ability to be a powerful unifying force. As the Jewish community at large experiences heightened interdenominational quarrels and arguments about such issues as the Mideast peace process and how to relate to interfaith families, the JCC remains a communal institution that actively seeks to build a heterogeneous Jewish constituency.

JCCs also offer numerous entry points into involvement with the organized Jewish community. Their preschool, after school, camping, health and physical education, JCC Maccabi Youth Games, informal Jewish education, the arts, and a multitude of other programs reach over one million members and hundreds of thousands of additional Jewish participants and provide a concrete connection to the Jewish community and repeated opportunities for Jewish association. Although many of those served by the JCC are otherwise unaffiliated, the majority (72%) are members of synagogues. The old argument that we compete for members with synagogues is just not true. Joint outreach and coordinated planning to connect with those who are unaffiliated can only be a win-win proposition.

Because successful outreach can best be achieved through the joint efforts of numerous institutions, federations should play an even greater role in fostering collaborative efforts among Jewish agencies so that people who enter communal life through one doorway can easily move among various opportunities for connection and affiliation. For example, one federation, in its planning for Jewish education, formed a commission on Jewish education and hired a community coordinator who was based at the JCC. Although he was not formally a member of the JCC staff, the interactions between the JCC Jewish educators and the community coordinator greatly enhanced the services available to the community. Another federation funded a JCC Commu-

nity Youth Coordinator who serves congregational youth groups, further illustrating what new means of interagency cooperation are possible.

Imagine what we could accomplish if federations based community youth workers in each JCC and charged them with coordinating follow-up activities for all teens returning from Israel! What about a similar joint effort to reach out and engage post-college-aged young adults who are not in most cases being effectively reached by individual agencies?

#### **Ensuring the Success of the JCC-Federation Partnership**

Certain changes in the culture within which we operate may ensure the smooth operation of the strategic partnership suggested here. Regular, frank, and open discussions must take place beyond the formal meetings at which agency allocations are determined. Federation leaders should visit the JCC and be aware of what is offered. A reliance on brief presentations and all too hurried deliberations at a time when funding decisions need to be made does not enable the JCC or other agencies to do justice to their work. Nor does the allocation process allow JCC leaders to gain enough of an appreciation of other communal needs making demands upon the federation.

JCCs and federations must work together to ensure good and timely communication. When new lay and professional people assume key positions at federation, they must receive an in-depth orientation and exposure to agency service delivery systems. A similar process must take place at the JCC, so that JCC leaders become familiar with the work of federation beyond its allocations to the JCC and beyond being asked for a campaign gift.

Centers should actively and creatively promote the campaign and other federation efforts among all the people they touch. Center leaders must assume active roles in campaign and federation committees. At

the same time, federation lay and professional leaders should visibly support the JCC, minimally as members and by attendance at some of its functions.

#### **CONCLUSION**

One hundred years ago when federations were being formed, they were seen as a new and vital vehicle for ensuring the future of the Jewish agencies that created them. Federations have indeed made an enormous difference in the ability of the Jewish community to respond to evolving domestic and international needs in one of the most tumultuous periods in Jewish history.

In the coming years, the Jewish community will clearly require greater collaboration among all Jewish institutions, even more sophisticated communal planning, and more effective ways of securing the funds needed to ensure the physical, mental, and spiritual well-being of our people. For federations to continue playing a central role in these areas, it must create the type of strategic partnerships with its major constituent agencies that are outlined here and must continually respond to cultural and communal changes. Traditional models are already being challenged and will not survive our current situation. Clearly, collective wisdom and strong resources are available in each and every community, and it is to those assets that we must turn.

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