

A Model Multi-Service Community-Based Agency*

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The Ark, Chicago

Although the total Jewish community is involved, policy formation (at the Ark) has an Orthodox or Halachic orientation. Over a hundred and fifty volunteers, lay people and professionals, young and old, men and women, Orthodox, Reform, Conservative, Reconstructionist, non-affiliated, and disaffiliated, find a nexus at the Ark.

The year was 1970. Enter on the communal scene: (1) a group of young Turks within Chicago's Jewish Federation which was pressuring its leadership to reorder local priorities, especially by reducing its support to Jewish hospitals and becoming involved with more intrinsically Jewish concerns; (2) a young woman with recent data on Chicago's Jewish poor based on a city-wide survey which she had personally underwritten and directed; (3) a young, charismatic Orthodox rabbi working part-time in an Albany Park Jewish bookstore and part-time as a youth outreach worker for the Association for Torah Advancement (A.F.T.A.), a local organization which at the height of the campus protests and counter-culture days had hired him to develop a program which would return alienated young Jews to the fold; and (4) a friend of this rabbi, a young Orthodox doctor who, among his other activities was the director of the community clinic in a private, non-sectarian hospital located in a depressed community adjacent to Albany Park. Albany Park, itself, is typical of many urban Jewish communities on the decline, being abandoned and leaving a residuum of poor and aging Jews.

The community clinic was the target of a neighborhood leftist organization's demands for free medical care for the neighborhood's poor, mainly blacks, Hispanics, and the southern whites, whom they purported to represent. After a series

of meetings between hospital representatives and representatives of this group, the former attired in suits and ties, the latter in chains and red bandanas, the Orthodox doctor was astounded to learn that the groups' leaders, both men and women were actually Jewish, and that one was Israeli. He also learned that among the neighborhood residents turning to this organization for help was a percentage of Jewish poor and elderly who were oblivious to the portrait of Mao Tse-Tung hanging in the waiting room of its storefront clinic.

Both doctor and rabbi were quick to recognize the potential of such a vehicle for attracting socially conscious young Jewish volunteers. A similar operation might be established under Jewish auspices, which would direct its service to the Jewish poor, but espouse the ethics of Torah rather than the politics of Marx. In theory, they would be killing two birds with one stone, serving the poor and elderly while offering disenfranchised Jews an opportunity for reinvolvement with the Jewish community.

Chicago's Jewish community is small enough so that contact was soon established between the doctor and rabbi and the young woman involved in research on the Jewish poor. Her data identified Albany Park as the community with the greatest concentration of indigents. The word spread. Others quickly became involved in the project and in March, 1971, after pooling all of their resources and contacts, the Ark, "The Torah's vehicle for sustaining individuals in a period of crisis," opened as a free clinic in a small second-floor medical suite. Within a few months

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the Ark's cause and anti-establishment grass roots style began attracting large numbers of young and not-so-young volunteers. Chicago's Jewish Federation offered the nascent agency an initial operating grant of twenty thousand dollars.

Ten years later, the Ark is a Jewish success story. It has succeeded well beyond its founders' expectations. The Ark is still located in Albany Park. The site, which it has occupied since 1973, is a double store-front whose interior was custom designed to include a reception area, offices for its six full-time and two part-time staff employees, a social room for a drop-in center and other programs, a food pantry, and a conference room. Thus, the Ark has grown from being exclusively a medical clinic into a community agency which offers a wide range of medical, legal, and social services. Services are offered either in its offices, using professional or trained lay volunteers, or through an outside network of volunteers who work in clients' homes or out of their own homes or offices. Its roster of services include in part: emergency financial aid, temporary housing, meals-on-wheels, transportation, assistance in completing government forms, client advocacy, short-term counseling, *brit milah*, camp scholarships, arrangements for a Jewish divorce, funeral arrangements, legal counseling and representation through a volunteer legal corps of fourteen attorneys, psychiatric counseling, routine medical examinations and tests, referrals to medical specialists, opthamologic and podiatric services, and dental services, from cleaning and simple amalgams to orthodontia and bridge-work. In addition, the Ark offers Jewish cultural and educational activities including a *minyan*, a weekly class in *Chumash* or *Pirke Avot*, a weekly *kiddush*, a community wide Chanukah party, the distribution of two thousand packages of *schlach manot* and *matanot le'vyonim* on Purim and *maot chittim* on Pesach, and other calendar events. The Ark's social

room is a place for anyone to drop in and *schmooze*, have a cup of coffee, read a newspaper or magazine (English or Yiddish), watch television, see a movie, hear a lecture, or just do nothing at all. Annual events also include a picnic, tickets to a professional baseball game, and periodic luncheons hosted by area synagogues. In short, the Ark is a combination community center, medical clinic, and *shul*. To those who make frequent use of its many services, the Ark is more of a club for which there is no membership fee or card. Both physically and spiritually, the Ark is a place to come in out of the rain.

The Ark maintains an active annual caseload of approximately 2,100 people. Only about forty percent of these actually live in the immediate community, but this group represents the single largest plurality. Sixty percent of Ark clients are sixty years old and older. The majority are female. The average annual income of an Ark client is \$3,900. Demonstrated need is really the only eligibility criterion at the Ark, although in some cases this can also refer to spiritual or social needs, i.e., loneliness, confusion, alienation. Geography and religion are not criteria for service. About ten percent of the Ark's clients are non-Jews.

Much of the Ark's work involves cooperation with other social welfare agencies in the city, both public and private. Referrals to the proper source when the Ark is not equipped to handle the case itself is, as in all agencies, an integral area of service. Likewise, about forty percent of the Ark's annual caseload represents referrals by other agencies. During its first years, the Ark struggled with such basic issues as developing recognition and establishing credibility. As a store-front operation with a small budget, there was and still is no large money set aside for publicity, public relations, and the like. Among its early detractors were professionals of other Jewish agencies, who in part no doubt resented the implication of the Ark's very

existence, namely, that the existing "establishment" agencies were not really doing the job. Indeed, a major obstacle between the founders of the Ark and the leadership of Federation was having to convince the latter that there *were* significant members of Jewish poor in Chicago and that these people were not receiving services through existing Federation agencies.

Since those days the situation has certainly come around. The Ark receives slightly over forty percent of its almost quarter of a million dollars 1981 budget from the Jewish Federation, a percentage which has remained fairly constant over the last few years. The balance is acquired through an open fund-raising campaign, a few private grants and proceeds from a used-merchandise store. The Ark receives no government monies. The Ark's small professional staff works closely with the staffs of all Federation agencies. Exemplary of this relationship is the accessibility of the clinic and hospital services of Chicago's Mt. Sinai Medical Center on a "Jewish-free" referral basis for Ark patients who require more intensive or sophisticated medical treatment.

Part of what distinguishes the Ark is its size, that it is able to offer a myriad of services under one small roof. In part, it is the Ark's particular style, informal and *heimish*. The Ark is a crisis intervention agency. Appointments with social workers are generally not made and the prevailing spirit is such that even our professional volunteers, our doctors and dentists, are known to reopen the door to their offices after seeing their last appointment in order to accommodate a straggler. Everyone is on a first name basis. In these ways we are still, "anti-establishment." Some see us as a movement. I call us, the "un-agency."

The Ark is also recognized, especially by Federation, as being extremely cost efficient. Its small professional staff, present mainly to facilitate the work of volunteers, receive competitive salaries and benefits

but are not affiliated with any comprehensive, costly bargaining package. Overhead is relatively low. Supplies, equipment, and other services are acquired, whenever possible, from Jewish sources, at cost or as gifts. What truly distinguishes the Ark is its philosophy. In the words of one of its founders, "While we have a mandate to provide the highest level of professional service to the Jewish poor, we have an equally strong mandate to provide Jewish volunteers with an opportunity to fulfill the *mitzvot* of *tzedaka* and *gemilat chesed* through service." The Ark was never established as just another social welfare agency under Jewish auspices; volunteerism is only a means to an end. The ultimate goal of the Ark, according to one of the founders, is that the "helper and the helped will feel a closer bond to each other through an enhancement of their common Jewishness." It brings the problem of the poor to the entire community, making *tzedaka* direct, but not easy.

Although the total Jewish community is involved, policy formation has an Orthodox or Halachic orientation. Over a hundred and fifty volunteers, lay people and professionals, young and old, men and women, Orthodox, Reform, Conservative, Reconstructionist, non-affiliated, and dis-affiliated, find a nexus at the Ark. If its goal is somewhat lofty, then its objective is simply "to promote positive Jewish identification based on a social action model instead of the more typical evangelical, fundamentalist model which seeks to change the personal lifestyle of an individual vis-a-vis kashrut, Shabbat observance, etc. The framework is Halachic Judaism; the application is communal service. With respect to the former, the goal is not to convince anyone to observe the *mitzvot*, but to respect the *mitzvot*. From this center of common respect flows a common Jewish fraternity. Regarding the latter, the Ark provides a broad enough range of services and activities so as to

permit non-Orthodox volunteers having reservations about the Ark's Orthodox posture to serve still, because of its overarching positive contribution to the community's welfare.

The greatest challenge confronting the Ark is change. The continuing attrition of Jews from the immediate area has its

leadership engaged in a reexamination of its present location and programs. The Ark, a grass-roots phenomenon, is not confronted with the prospect of formal long-range planning. Its ability to survive, to use Weber's phrase, this "bureaucratization of the revolution," is the key to its second decade of service.