

# ACCESSING JEWISH COMMUNITY SERVICES: THE GROWTH OF JEWISH INFORMATION SERVICES

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*Born out of generic information services and wedded to the ideals of commitment to Jewish communal services, Jewish community information and referral services have grown by leaps and bounds in the last five to ten years. Their growth is indicative of the growth of the Jewish community, the expansion of services, and the need for a single point of entry for easier access to services.*

## ABSTRACT

The proliferation of services provided by constituent agencies of Jewish Federations across the country has made it difficult for any one person or any one agency to be familiar with all of them. Twelve Jewish communities across the country have responded to the need for a single point of entry for easier access to information about and linkage with services in respective Jewish communities. This article traces the development of Jewish Information Services and the North American Network of Jewish Information Services. Implications for Jewish Communal Service and recommendations for future research and direction conclude the paper.

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## INTRODUCTION

Jewish Federations across the country have historically evolved into umbrella organizations comprised of affiliated and funded agencies. As such, Federation offices are often the first place called when a newcomer, or anyone else for that matter, has a question about the Jewish community. The proliferation of services makes it difficult for any one person in the Federation or any of their constituent agencies to be totally familiar with all the other agencies and services they provide.

In addition, there are many organizations and agencies which service the Jewish community but remain outside the umbrella of their Federations. The explosion in the fields of Jewish art, theatre, entertainment, social services, cultural programs and educational activities geared to specific populations (e.g., children, singles, senior adults) add to the growing list of activities of interest to Jewish consumers, as well as newcomers.

Until ten years ago there was no formal service one could call to find out where to buy a Jewish record or a kosher meal downtown. Instead, people generally called the larger, better known Jewish agencies, which handled routine and often one-of-a-kind requests as best as they could.

Within the decade, however, twelve of the larger Jewish communities (seven within the last five years), Toronto, Montreal, New York City, Boston, Baltimore, Cleveland, San Francisco, Detroit, Miami, Philadelphia, Chicago and Fort Lauderdale, have responded to the need for one central point of access for information about services and resources in the Jewish community.

This article first briefly outlines the historical context of Information and Referral Services out of which Jewish Information Services developed. Second, results of a survey questionnaire sent to each program director (except Montreal, where the service was too new) are discussed. Third, the development and potential for growth of the North American Network of Jewish Information Services is explored. The implications for policy and planning at the national level and recommendations for future direction and research conclude the paper.

#### WHAT IS INFORMATION AND REFERRAL?

The purpose of Information and Referral Services (I&R) are "1) to link the client with services and 2) to provide meaningful data to planners on demands, gaps and duplications of services."<sup>1</sup>

Many social service agencies provide I&R services to their clients at one time or another. To be considered an I&R service, however, separate funding, staff and resources need to be allocated according to the National Alliance of Information and Referral Services (AIRS) standards. What makes I&R different from other programs is that Information and Referral is a one-stop single access shopping service. Information specialists (volunteers or staff)

determine with the inquirer the type of information and resources needed and refer and facilitate access to agencies as appropriate. Information and referral services help the client bridge the gap among different services.

The proliferation of services in our post-industrial society can make the search for information time consuming, frustrating and confusing. Levinson and Haynes write about the "ping-pong" process in which clients are bounced from one agency to another.<sup>2</sup> Often agency staff are unaware of the different services available in the community. In fact, if one has no knowledge of services, and cannot access them, for that client services might as well not exist.

The single access system is integral to the concept of Information and Referral. Kahn and Kamerman present a strong case for one central organization which can serve as a vehicle for communication between those in need and agencies which serve those needs.<sup>3</sup>

There are generic Information and Referral Services that cover the broad range of services in a geographic area and specialized Information and Referral Services geared for specific population groups such as ethnic groups, veterans, disabled, and so forth. It is out of this large historical context that Information Services developed.

#### HISTORICAL BACKGROUND OF INFORMATION AND REFERRAL SERVICES

The Social Service Exchange, which had its origins in the Charity Organizations Societies of the 1870's, is considered the forerunner of today's Information and Referral Services. The objective of the ex-

1. William Garret, "Technological Advances in Information and Referral" in *Accessing Human Services: International Perspectives*. Risha Levinson and Karen Haynes, Eds., Sage Publications, California, 1984, p. 187.

2. Levinson and Haynes, *idem*, "Comparative Access Models," p. 15.

3. Alfred J. Kahn, *et al.*, Eds., *Neighborhood Information Centers, New York*: Columbia University School of Social Work, 1966.

change was to eliminate duplication and enhance coordination rather than provide easier access to services.<sup>4</sup>

The development of Veteran's information centers after World War II marked the beginning of public support for information services. The number of information and referral Services dramatically increased in the late 1960's and during the 1970's in response to the growth in services provided by the Public Health Service, the Administration on Aging, and the Department of Health, Education and Welfare. In 1972 a national association, the Alliance of Information and Referral Services (AIRS) was formed to serve as a clearing-house of information, provide training and consultation, and promote the development of Information and Referral Services.<sup>5</sup> In 1979, AIRS began publishing a professional journal, *Information and Referral: The Journal of the Alliance of Information and Referral Services*. The journal is concerned with practical and theoretical issues related to the impact of information and referral systems in the design and delivery of human services.<sup>6</sup>

National Professional Standards for Information and Referral Services were developed in 1983 in conjunction with the United Way of America.<sup>7</sup> At present, an AIRS committee is in the process of researching and possibility of an accreditation process. Many states have local and regional chapters of AIRS. Members include United Way and area agencies on aging, library information services, and a host of specialized I&RS serving specific populations.

Information services have developed in many countries as well. Information ser-

vices in Israel are modeled along the lines of Citizens Advice Bureaus in England. People can call, but mainly "walk-in" for information and advocacy regarding services and entitlements. In the United States, I&R is mainly a telephone service, and linkage rather than advocacy is the norm.<sup>8</sup>

#### JEWISH INFORMATION SERVICES

The history of Jewish community information services has its informal antecedents within many of the local agencies of Federations such as Jewish Family and Children's Services, Jewish community centers, Hillel, and so forth. People looking for information called any one of these agencies hoping to find an answer. Traditionally, agencies have tried to respond, but the growth in number of services and programs accompanied by specialized areas of expertise made it difficult for professionals in one agency to know the services of all the others. The Toronto Jewish Community was the first to recognize this problem and a Jewish Information Service was developed in 1973.<sup>9</sup>

During the process of developing the Greater Boston Jewish Community Information Service in 1985, the question of how, where, when and why other Jewish information services developed became most intriguing. The Directors of Jewish information services in Toronto, Boston and New York met for the first time at the 1985 Conference of Jewish Communal Service to discuss common interests and concerns. A survey questionnaire was sent to directors in other cities, and follow-up phone interviews were conducted by a student intern from the Benjamin S. Hornstein Program in Jewish Communal Service. The information gathered was

4. *United Way of America Information and Referral Programmed Resource and Training Course*. Alexandria, VA, 1979, p. 14.

5. *Ibid.*

6. *Information and Referral: The Journal of the Alliance of Information and Referral Services*, publishes a summer and winter issue annually.

7. Levinson and Haynes, *op. cit.*, p. 21.

8. For further discussion on international perspectives see Riska Levinson and Karen Haynes, *op. cit.*

9. Jewish Information Service of Toronto opened after a year of preparation, only to close because of the priority of the (1973) Yom Kippur War in Israel. JIS reopened six months later.

*Table 1*

## WHERE AND WHEN SERVICES DEVELOPED

1973	Jewish Information Service (JIS), Greater Metro Toronto, Canada
1975	Jewish Information Service (JIS), Cleveland Heights, Ohio
1977	Jewish Information and Referral Service (JIRS), Miami, Florida
1980	Jewish Information Service (JIS), New York, New York
1981	Jewish Family Service of Broward County (JFS), Fort Lauderdale, Florida
1983	Ezra Hotline, Chicago, Illinois
	Jewish Information Service (JIS), Baltimore, Maryland
1984	Jewish Information and Referral Service (JIRS), Philadelphia, Pennsylvania
1985	Jewish Community Information Service (JCIS), Greater Boston, Massachusetts
	Jewish Information and Referral Service (JIRS), Oak Park (Detroit), Michigan
1986	Jewish Information Service (JIS), Montreal, Canada
	Jewish Community Information and Referral (JCIR), San Francisco, California

shared at a second meeting at a national AIRS conference in which six out of the ten programs (open at that time) were represented. While the survey was informal, all ten directors responded either in writing or through a phone interview. A summary and discussion of the responses to the most important questions are outlined.

Table 1 traces the chronological development of Jewish Information Services. The names of the services are reflective of the specific nature of most of the services. In most cities the target population is the Jewish community and expertise is in Jewish community resources. The early services developed autonomously and independently of one another while more recent ones were able to benefit from existing programs. The Jewish Information Services of Framingham, Massachusetts, and Ottawa, Canada, established the need for a social service agency in their communities and evolved into their respective Jewish family services.<sup>10</sup>

10. On the other hand, there are many social service agencies that provide information and referral services in an informal way. The Jewish information service discussed here have all received separate funding for staff and provide service through trained volunteers or information specialists. Since the 1986 survey San Francisco and Montreal have begun service and St. Louis is in the process of planning one for 1988. The author would be delighted to hear from readers if there are any such programs which have been overlooked or are in the process of opening.

## HOW SERVICES WERE DEVELOPED

Most Information and Referral Services developed out of the lay leadership of Federation task forces, committees or planning departments. Baltimore's JIS was developed jointly with Jewish Family Service and Women's Division of Federation. Boston's was developed as a program of Jewish Family and Children's Service, funded by Combined Jewish Philanthropies, and the information service in Fort Lauderdale is a program of the Jewish Family Service of Broward County. Toronto is a free-standing constituent agency of the local Federation, while others are programs or an arm of the planning department of their Federation.

The diverse reasons given by directors for starting Jewish information services fall into a similar pattern as do the goals and objectives.

## WHY SERVICES DEVELOPED

1. The switchboards of many agencies were inundated with calls not related to their particular service.
2. There was a need for a central number where individuals could find the services they wanted.
3. There was a need for more aggressive outreach to the community.
4. There was a need for someone to answer the informational calls received by Federations that no one knew how to answer.

Table 2  
VOLUME OF SERVICES AND STAFFING PATTERNS

City	Auspices	Service Hours	Estimated Jewish Population	Calls per Month	Staff FT/PT	Volunteers	Students
Toronto, Canada (1973)	Federation (agency)	Full time	128,500	1500	2	90	1-2
Cleveland, OH (1975)	Federation	Full time	85,000	350-400	1	4	
Miami, FL (1977)	Federation	Full time	250,000	300	1/ 1		
New York, NY (1980)	Federation	Full time	2,000,000	2000	1/ 1 + sec	35	
Chicago, IL (1983)	Federation	Full time	250,000	350	1	42	
Baltimore, MD (1983)	Federation	20 hours and JFS	92,000	200	1 + sec	14	
Philadelphia, PA (1985)	Federation	Full time	250,000	350	1	12	
Oak Park, MI (1985)	Federation	Full time	80,000	150	1/ sec	30	
Boston, MA (1985)	JFCS and Federation	12 hours	250,000	150-200	1	8	1
San Francisco (1985)	Federation	Full time	80,000	350	1/ 1		
Fort Lauderdale	JFS	Full time	15,000	100-150	1		

5. Staff of Jewish agencies did not necessarily know all of the services available.

The goals and objectives are a result of the frustration of both consumers in accessing services as well as professionals in providing information and referral outside their specific area of expertise.

### GOALS AND OBJECTIVES

Goals include:

1. To provide information about the Jewish community resources (and community at large)
2. To reach out to people not involved in Federation services
3. To match clients with available services
4. To serve as a single point of entry into many services provided by the Jewish community
5. To discover gaps and unmet service needs
6. To help Federations and agencies become more accessible to the general public.

Table 2 summarizes the number of calls each service averages per month (1985-1986), the hours of operation, and staffing patterns.

The New York agency has by far the most calls per month and of course its

metropolitan area has the largest Jewish population. All but two of the services have full time directors and all but three are run with the help of volunteers. Nine of the twelve directors are social workers and two services have student interns. Seven of the communities have Jewish populations of approximately 100,000 or more.

Examination of the nature of requests collected from the surveys reveals gaps in service that are common themes in various cities. A word of caution is in order, as the nature of information and referral services varies, reflecting and responding to changes in the particular community served. It is significant that 50% of the Jewish information services reported some aspect of elderly services as their number one request for information. Even more significant is the fact that ten cities reported some aspect of elderly service in their top ten requests for information, while Fort Lauderdale and Miami were geared specifically for the elderly. Demographic studies indicate that greater numbers of Jewish elderly are living longer, and the proportion of Jewish "frail" elderly (75 and over) is steadily increasing. These data indicate that the elderly need help in accessing services. Discussions with directors point up that some services may exist within the community, e.g., Housing for the Jewish

elderly, nursing homes, and homemaker services, but the long waiting list of applicants—sometimes years—make attempts at access seem futile. In these cases clients are helped to find alternatives in the non-Jewish Community. These unmet needs should be documented and reported to Federations.

Housing, mentioned as one of the top five requests for information, is another major issue. The housing markets in the Jewish communities of New York, Toronto, and Boston are extremely tight and expensive. Requests for housing range from those by newcomers, students, single adults and families wanting information on where to live and how to find an apartment to desperate calls for emergency shelter from transients and marginally functioning adults who move from place to place. In an attempt to tap the hidden availability—single rooms, boarders, attic apartments, etc.—Toronto and Baltimore operate a housing registry with some degree of success.

No Jewish community is immune from the requests for employment, financial assistance or emergency food and shelter. These issues were placed among the top ten requests for information. People turn to the Jewish community in times of need, but have no idea of the services available or whom to call. Jewish information service helps bridge the gap. In two Jewish communities, Toronto and Chicago, the Jewish information service operates a "hotline" service.

The category of "donations" was mentioned twice as one of the top five requests for information and three times as one of the top ten. People want to know where to donate clothing, furniture and money. Estate lawyers call to find out how to locate a specific charity. Others may want to know how to set up a trust fund or where to donate their old car. It is a guess how much money Jewish information services have helped direct to the Jewish community which otherwise may have been lost.

One drawback in analyzing the statistics is that each service has slightly different request categories and recording procedures, but the patterns do emerge. Housing requests, emergency services, and services for the elderly rank very high. How to locate organizations, Jewish religious information, donations, and child care rank a little lower, but are still high on the overall list of requests.

It would be interesting to compare the top ten requests for information with non-Jewish I&RS. At least in the Greater Boston area the patterns are similar. There is one significant difference, however. In most cases Jewish people (particularly the elderly) called looking for resources in the Jewish community. Where did all these people go before Jewish information services existed? Did non-sectarian information and referral services experience a sudden drop in the number of requests? The author hypothesizes that for the most part the population tapped is one that has not used non-Jewish information and referral services but feel perfectly comfortable calling a Jewish one.

#### LEARNING OF JEWISH INFORMATION SERVICES

The pattern which evolved out of the responses includes referrals by the local Federations and constituent agencies, particularly Jewish family services, Jewish community centers and Jewish vocational services. In addition, advertisements in Jewish papers, friends, relatives, and word of mouth were also cited among the top five referral sources. What was not included in the survey was how often agency professionals themselves called upon Jewish information services to help their own clients. It is the author's experience that providing resources for the professional community is an integral part of Jewish information services.

In every city, over 90% of the callers themselves were Jewish, except for Chicago, where only 35% of the callers

are Jewish. All nine services targeted the Jewish community but were receptive to non-Jewish callers. Each service had knowledge of non-Jewish resources, although general I&Rs exist in the community to handle those calls.

Most services try to provide follow-up to see the callers received service from sources to which they were referred. Chicago is unique in their follow-up, in that each constituent agency of the Federation to whom a client is referred is obligated to follow up with Ezra (the local information service).

According to the survey responses, approximately 75-80% of clients received services. What number of the remaining clients were ineligible for services, did not follow through, or for whom services did not exist was not clear. These statistics are favorable considering that the fate of clients referred to an agency usually varies. Perhaps one third will drop out of the process. They give up, forget the matter, or get help from informal channels. About half of those who made contact are accepted.

Follow-up calls are time-consuming, but well worth the effort. It is very rare that people do not appreciate the time for a call to them to find out whether they received services.

#### DISCUSSION

What do all these statistics mean, and what are the implications for Jewish communal service? First, it is clear that a need for a single point of access for Jewish and non-Jewish community resources exists within the Jewish community, as evidence by the growth of Jewish information services. Seven out of the ten surveyed opened since 1980, and two more opened in 1986 for a total of twelve.

Second, the most frequently cited referral sources are those agencies people have traditionally turned to first for help. If *they* need to refer people to Jewish Information Services, how much greater must the need be among others in the com-

munity looking to access service!

Third, the nature of requests is not strictly how to locate Jewish organizations or where people can find a kosher butcher. Jewish information services prove to be much more than "talking yellow pages"; they are professional services provided by trained volunteers and staff who are for the most part social workers and educators.

Fourth, the nature of requests themselves indicates the need for access to both Jewish and non-Jewish resources. Each information service has a unique character depending upon the conditions under which it developed; it for the most part complements the services of the generic I&R in its community and clients are referred in both directions.

Fifth, Jewish information services identify and document unmet needs. In one community, housing, Jewish childcare or homecare for the elderly are apparently unmet needs. In another, emergency services and financial assistance are apparent priorities.

Sixth, Jewish information services have become an "intake" source for the Jewish community, an important referral source and source of outreach to newcomers and unaffiliated Jews. Clients are referred to appropriate local or out-of-state Jewish communal agencies with the help of the national network. Jewish information services also facilitate community building as newcomers and others experience the free service provided by a caring community.

Seventh, many new directions are possible for Jewish information services. Some have already published directories, started 24-hour distress lines and housing registries. The author envisions Jewish Information Services providing newcomers to a community with an Information Network to help ease the trauma of relocating. In addition, Jewish information services could develop singles activities hotlines or matchmaking referral services for young adults or senior adults. More significantly, Jewish information services could become

the community access point for linking people who need help with emergency services concerning alcoholism, AIDS, domestic violence, homelessness, and financial assistance with appropriate social services in the Jewish community.

#### IMPLICATIONS FOR RESEARCH AND POLICY—THE NATIONAL NETWORK

The implications for the Jewish community are many. It is one thing to talk about needs and gaps in services. It is another to identify and document them. Some services have more sophisticated mechanisms for recording and translating statistics into usable data, even if informally. The formal mechanism of sharing information is usually through monthly or annual reports to the planning department of the local Federation. How usable the data are and whether planning departments translate them into policies and action is an important question. The potential is great, yet has remained virtually untapped. How much more useful could this information be if it were uniformly available on a nationwide basis?

The "information of society" (information as organized data, refined into knowledge and combined into wisdom) has become the predominant resource in post-industrial society.<sup>11</sup> Information is one commodity that is expandable, comprehensible, transportable and shareable. The demand for information and access to services constantly expands, and the need to compress the information so that it is knowable is valuable. It travels well across state lines and, when shared, its effectiveness is strengthened.

It is within this creative climate that the idea of a National Network of Jewish Information Services was nurtured. Information and resources, clients and even

volunteers can be shared as people and information move from community to community. All this is presently being done among the Jewish information services in an informal capacity. Directors have spoken on the phone, corresponded, and met with one another to share ideas and resources.

In 1985 when the author, together with the Directors of JIS, New York, called for a meeting of directors to discuss the idea, three participated. In 1986, six directors met at the AIRS Conference and the informal network was born. In the Fall of 1986, Jewish information services were represented for the first time at the General Assembly of the Council of Jewish Federations. By summer 1987, Jewish information service directors met in Boston with the Director of Community Planning of the Council of Jewish Federations and a representative of the Association of Jewish Family and Children's Agencies to plan sessions for lay leaders and Planning Directors at the 1987 General Assembly. Group consultations were also arranged for communities interested in developing Jewish information services. The informal network became the North American Network of Jewish Information Services. Among its goals are the sharing and exchange of information and resources, provision for input into local and national planning, and offering of consultation services to interested Jewish communities. Future plans include developing uniform record keeping on data collection systems and a working manual for communities interested in organizing a Jewish information service.

The possibilities for research are many. What are the differences between agency- and Federation-based services? How can Jewish information service data be used and the link with local and national planning strengthened? What are the segments of the Jewish population not being served by Federation agencies? What are the needs and the gaps in services which exist locally and nationally? How can data

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11. Cleveland Harlan, "The Twilight of Hierarchy: Speculations on the Global Information Society" in *Information and Referral: The Journal of AIRS*, Volume 7, No. 1 (Summer 1985), p. 3-7.



about unmet needs and successful services to meet those needs developed in other communities be easily networked among Jewish agencies and communities?

The informal survey was meant as only a beginning, a consciousness raising to bring to the Jewish community's attention the present activity and future potential of the development of Jewish Information Services.

#### SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

This article attempted to bridge the gap in what is known about Jewish Information Services. Born out of generic information services and wedded to the ideals of commitment to Jewish communal services, Jewish community information and referral services have grown by leaps and bounds in the last five to ten years. Their growth is indicative of the growth of the Jewish community, the expansion of services, and the need for a single point of

entry for easier access to services.

The nature of the requests across the country are more similar than different. Gaps in services, unmet needs in Jewish child care, home care, services to the elderly, and tight housing market within the Jewish community all appear in the top ten requests for services. Meaningful data for planning services could emerge both locally and nationally within the next decade if data collection were standardized, computerized, and shared through interlocking computer systems.

Information has always been a part of our past and present; accessing it will become even more crucial in the future. The Jewish community information service is already preparing for the future, for even as its goals and directions expand, it rests firmly on the bedrock of its commitment to linking, networking, connecting, sharing information, and enhancing service delivery within the Jewish community.