

A Jewish Communal Response to the Current Economic Crisis*

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THE current economic climate, relating both to the high unemployment rate and cutbacks in services and funding, has placed great strains on our Jewish family and vocational agencies. We are being called on more and more frequently to provide services for individuals and families experiencing the effects of this economic crisis while concurrently we ourselves, as individuals and as agencies, are experiencing the impact of these times, too. This situation may then be creating a tremendous dilemma for us as service providers, that is, the inability to provide comprehensive services, whether due to cutbacks in funding or in staff, or to the lack of coordinated approaches to the issues, at the very moment at which these services are needed the most.

This article will describe some of the issues that we in Louisville have been grappling with in this dilemma and the techniques and concepts we have developed. Our agency is a merged family service and vocational agency. My own background is in family service. We are located in the Louisville metropolitan area which has approximately one million in population and a Jewish community of less than 9,000.

Louisville, a big blue-collar town in which General Electric, Ford, and International Harvester have traditionally

been the major employers, has suffered greatly in this current crisis, unlike its experience in the recession of 1974-75. Two recent articles in the *Wall Street Journal*¹ and *New York Times*² illustrate well the ongoing effects of unemployment in Louisville while we are being told that on a national level recovery has begun. The rate of unemployment for the last quarter of 1982 equaled 12.2% and has not significantly decreased in 1983.³ Though the Jewish community in Louisville is not predominantly blue-collar, there has been a sharp increase in Jewish unemployment. This can be seen in the failure of small businesses and in the loss of technical and professional positions within local companies and in the service area (especially teaching, social service, insurance). This, along with the sharp increase in our Jewish clients being cut back or cut off completely from federal or state entitlement programs, has increased our caseloads greatly with needs for financial help, job placement and development and personal or family counseling.

The agency, which was consolidated in 1978, has attempted to develop an interdisciplinary systems approach to

¹ Laurie McGinley, "Uneven Upturn: Signs of the Recovery Finally Hit Louisville, but not all feel Effect", *Wall Street Journal*, April 20, 1983, p. 1.

² Peter Kilborn, "A Tale of Two Cities", *New York Times*, May 8, 1983, p. C1.

³ Louisville Office of Manpower Services, Kentucky Cabinet for Human Resources, *Labor Market Information Review*, January, 1983, p. 2.

the clients' needs for service. (These concepts that I will discuss are applicable to cities with separate agencies.) Our system takes into account the financial, employment and emotional needs of clients while recognizing certain realities which exist in a multidisciplinary agency including past training, expertise and turf. Some of the ways in which this has been developed are:

1. Weekly staff meetings or in-service sessions for all staff for which each program area of the agency is responsible on a rotating basis. Some of the issues and topics raised over the past several months are: the psychological impact of unemployment; the New-American community and employment; futurism, forecasting, and career development; the "normal" adolescent and his/her role in the family. These sessions provide concrete information and an opportunity for sharing of differing perspectives among vocational counselors and social workers as well as reinforcing the concept of the client in his/her total system.

2. Integration of some clinical social work staff into the vocational services unit in such roles as seeing clients and attending vocational staff meetings. This factor, on a more individualized case basis, aids in integrating the approaches to the multiple needs of the client.

3. Development of an internal cross referral network between vocational and clinical counseling units so that any one individual client and/or family may be seen by both a vocational and clinical counselor during a period of time. Case records are then kept jointly and consultation between workers is ongoing.

4. Jewish family life education groups facilitated by a Jewish family life educator and a vocational counselor; some of the groups in operation have included women's reentry into the job market, teenagers' vocational/

educational decision-making processes, emotional reactions to unemployment as part of ongoing job club, and assertiveness skills for the unemployed.

This system of staff training and service delivery has raised some crucial issues on three levels; staff, agency, client. First looking at the staff level, three areas need to be explored: turf, expertise and countertransference.

Even *within* an agency there are turf issues that arise among professionals in terms of who should be delivering a particular service and/or what is the best approach to a specific client need. We have attempted to acknowledge that these tensions exist and deal with them on a case-by-case basis. Part of the turf problems arise when there is a lack of information or misinformation about a particular discipline, or individual's experience and this can be addressed directly. In cities where separate vocational and family agencies exist, it would seem crucial to develop linkages and deal up front with turf issues. On a national level the Association of Jewish Family and Children's Agencies and the National Association of Jewish Vocational Services have begun meetings and locally agencies could pick up on this trend on a supervisory or line worker level.⁴ This relates to the second concern—that of expertise. Clinical social workers are not necessarily trained in job search skills, job development, etc., while vocational counselors often do not consider their major expertise to be in areas of clinical counseling, personal and family development, relationships and adjustments. Thus clients who come to one or the other agency often

⁴ Association of Jewish Family and Children's Agencies, "Minutes: January 27-28, 1983. AJFCA—National Association of Jewish Vocational Services Meeting on the Impact of the Recession", Association #83-29, February 10, 1983.

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have only part of their needs met, whether it be developing job search skills, omitting dealing with the emotional impact of unemployment on himself and family or treating depression, helplessness, or low self esteem, omitting dealing with the actual systemic reality, unemployment. Making each discipline more aware of some of the other issues and using one another as consultants and referrals break down the isolation and decrease the number of clients who fall between the cracks.

Finally, the area of countertransference, which is rarely touched on in this context. The Feb. 1983 issue of *Social Casework*⁵ contains as its main article "Serving the Unemployed" in which the authors maintain that counselors must attend to their own mental health in order to be available to their unemployed clients. Working with the unemployed and financially burdened person can be very stressful. Workers have expressed feelings of frustration at not being able to "find this person a job". There may be feelings of guilt because the worker, himself, does have a job. Stress, related to the worker's own job security, can also enter into the relationship as well as his or her preparedness for a job search, if necessary. Denial that "unemployment could ever happen to me" can often have impact on a worker's relationship with clients; the traditional Jewish attitude towards work which, among other things, sees work as necessary and holy, could also play a role. Counselors need to become aware of their own values concerning work and unemployment and how they are reacting to their clients. This can often be done in a peer group supportive environment, which can help minimize

⁵ Esther Krystal, Marsha M. Sackett, Sylvia Thompson and Lucy Cantoni, "Serving the Unemployed", *Social Casework*, February, 1983, p. 67.

feelings of frustration, helplessness and burnout.

On an agency level, other issues need to be explored when looking at the effects of economic crisis and the use of a more interdisciplinary approach. Advocacy both within the Jewish and general communities on issues relating to our clients must take a high priority. This could take the form of advocating for an individual client or family with another Jewish communal institution for a scholarship to camp or a reduction in synagogue membership, for example. It could take the form of revitalizing the vocational advisory councils formed at the height of the Russian immigrant resettlement to act as a link between agency and business community to help groups of clients. It could take the form of acting as advocates for ourselves as staff with expertise to share with other communal agencies to help them understand and utilize for their own needs concepts of stress, unemployment, etc. Advocacy could finally take the form of advocating to our funding sources with clear, documented evidence of need for service.

In 1982, Metro United Way of Louisville for the first time in its history funded our vocational services for securing a part-time job developer and facilitator of a job club, based on clear documentation of a successful trial experience. (This has since been expanded to a full time position, again funded by MUW.) These times call for educating funding sources about the trickle down effect of unemployment and financial cuts which have impact on all areas of families' lives, vocationally and emotionally. It also calls for keeping clear statistics and working with local Federations in ascertaining specific numbers and effects of the recession in local areas. Our agency, as others around the country, being realistic about cutbacks in funding, has begun to utilize volun-

teers more effectively in direct service capacities. In each of our job clubs we use trained volunteers to assist professionals. Volunteers are also utilized in such areas as job development, as teachers of job search skills, or as one-on-one special friends to provide support to isolated and needy children or adults. Besides funding cutbacks, our agency is experiencing a large dropoff in fee income although the number of clients increases, a phenomenon which is surely not confined to Louisville.

Finally we need to move to the individual or family who is deeply affected by the economic times. Besides the chronically marginal people—those people who have always utilized our services because of marginal income, employment or life situation—we are seeing many of the new poor".⁶ These new poor consist of people with stable work histories and middle-class status who have unexpectedly lost jobs, often of a professional or technical nature, and are facing severe financial and emotional burdens. H. G. Kaufman, an industrial psychologist, in a new book *Professionals in Search of Work*⁷ maintains that the loss of a job to this group may be more stressful because their work is more central to their sense of self esteem. Kaufman and others identify four stages that the new poor experience starting first with shock; then a period of concerted effort to find work; after six months of unemployment, doubt and vacillation set in, followed finally, if still unemployed, resignation, malaise and cynicism. This grieving process or acknowledgement of loss must occur in some form or another.

The individual who fits into the new poor category then finds him or her self in a precarious situation. Dr. Harvey

⁶ AJFCA, *op. cit.*, p. 1.

⁷ H. G. Kaufman, *Professionals in Search of Work*. New York: Wiley-Interscience, 1982, p. 12.

Brenner of Johns Hopkins has described a "Depression mentality" in which individuals convert their economic loss into a strong feeling of personal loss, often combined with an irrational sense of guilt and anxiety about survival.⁸ Thus it becomes very important for the worker to stress the systemic nature of this economic crisis versus individual pathology and practice advocacy as mentioned earlier as a means to alleviate some of this depression.

Keeping all of this in mind, it becomes self evident that in working with the unemployed it is impossible to focus on just the job search or just the emotional ramifications on an individual or family. The interaction of unemployment and mental health has been studied and Brenner's statistics updated and reconfirmed by a 1979 National Institute of Mental Health study to show that a rise of one percent in the unemployment rate, if sustained over six-year period, is associated with a 4.1 percent increase in suicide, 5.7 percent increase in homicide and 4.3 percent increase in first-time admission (of males) to state mental hospitals.⁹ Across the country, Jewish family agencies have documented the rise in family violence, family break-ups, effects of women in the job market, recent graduates unable to find jobs withdrawing from normal activities, and financial crunches which have caused family stress and diminished expectations.¹⁰ In our experience in working with this new poor client, whether they

⁸ Harvey Brenner, *Mental Health and the Economy*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1973.

⁹ Group for the Advancement of Psychiatry, *Job Loss—A Psychiatric Perspective*. New York: Mental Health Materials Center, 1982, p. 10.

¹⁰ Association of Jewish Family and Childrens Agencies, "AJFCA Reports: What Problems are Jewish Families Having as a Result of the Recession and Federal Budget Cuts?", Association #83-04, January 10, 1982, pp. 1-7.

come into the agency through the clinical or through vocational services, we as counselors need to deal with the myriad of issues: the loss, grieving, depression, helplessness, family disappointment plus the concrete job search and financial needs at the same time, in order to meet the needs presented by this group.

This then creates challenges for our agencies and necessitates a more interdisciplinary systems approach to best serve the client. How do we proceed from here? I propose the following areas to consider:

1. Developing linkages between family service and vocational professionals which would include: interstaff trainings, use of consultants, joint case discussions, joint JFLE programs, specified referral networks.

2. Helping clinical workers to develop a better understanding of the role work plays in an individual's life by a) taking more detailed and accurate work histories of clients in order to ascertain how unemployment affects the self esteem of a particular individual, where they are in the grieving process, and how much of the presenting problem is unemployment related, b) hooking into the present social work literature, especially that of crisis intervention and loss and relating this to unemployment. In a review by Dr. Jane Charnas of the University of Maryland of literature on crisis intervention, she found no mention of unemployment as causing a crisis.¹¹ c) Developing some comfort level and skills in areas of resumé writing, job search, etc. and d) recognizing the present employment crisis as systemic, not necessarily individual.

3. Helping vocational workers to assess the emotional impact of unem-

ployment on clients and their families by sensitizing them to studies of loss, psychological reactions to unemployment and self esteem and then following through on these issues with clients and families, even after a job is found.

4. Developing staff support groups in or across agencies to deal with some of the countertransference and burnout issues.

5. Recognizing that the full impact of unemployment and financial burdens often do not end with finding new employment—family systems have changed, self perceptions have altered. The family or individual may continue to need support.

6. On an agency level, documenting numbers of clients, types of situations, gaps in service, and the like to be used with funding sources. It is clear that these new poor have always perceived themselves as donors to services rather than as users and their financial difficulties have severe ramifications, not just for individual agencies but for federations, who are losing contributors.

7. As part of the planning committees in agencies, a staff/board commitment to setting priorities and "trimming the fat" off programs while not forgetting that not all of our agency resources can be used for this population. As was discussed very heatedly at a recent national Jewish Family Life Education conference, our agencies have spent a long time trying to change our image to show that we don't serve just the poor. We don't want to about-face and again be viewed as the agencies serving just the unemployed.¹²

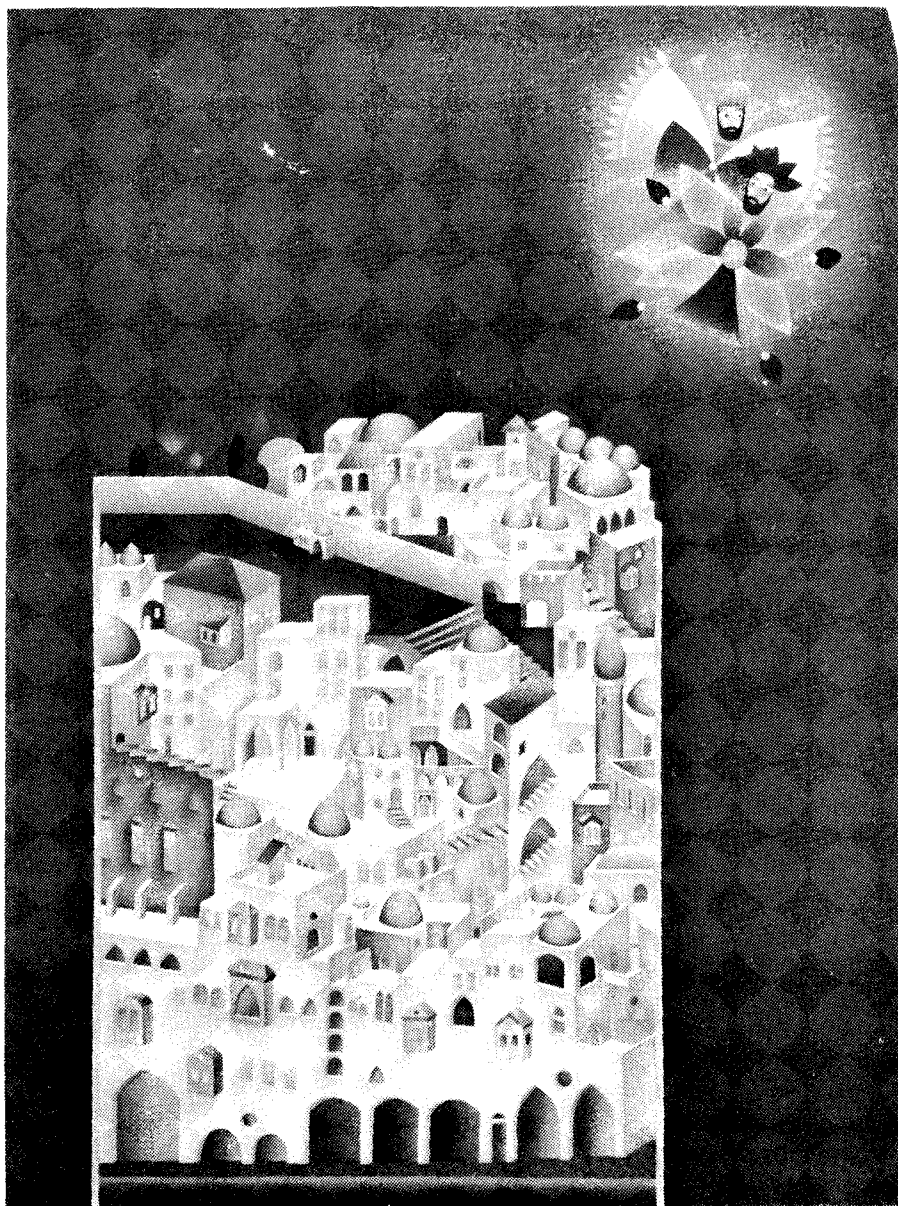
8. Advocacy on every level, transcending that of the Jewish community, to try to develop social policies more in consonance with human needs.

¹¹ M. Scott Moss, (ed.), "Social Work and the Employed", *NASW News*, Vol. 28 No. 1 (1983), p. 11.

¹² AJFCA/NACHES Jewish Family Life Education Institute, New York City, May 1, 1983.

The predictions about future economic trends don't look promising. Unemployment will probably never return to the four percent rate and certainly our labor market and financial opportunities are in the process of dramat-

ically changing right now. Our Jewish communal agencies need to adjust to these changing realities and to do so we must find mutually beneficial, integrated and supportive means.



Angels Over Jaffa. Oil by David Sharir.

Courtesy of Pucker Saffrai Gallery, 171 Newbury St., Boston, MA 02116 and also available from Seraphim Gallery, 780 West End Ave., New York, NY 10025.

From *The Melton Journal*, Spring, 1982.