

JEWISH COMMUNAL SERVICE: NOW AND THEN

JENNIFER ROSENBERG

Planning Director, Commission on Jewish Identity and Renewal, UJA-Federation of New York

and

SUSAN SHERR-SEITZ

Associate Director, Jewish Renaissance & Renewal, United Jewish Communities/JESNA, NY

Stephen Solender shares insights into recruitment and retention issues gained during his long career in Jewish communal service. He notes the disturbing trends of diminished contact between young and senior professionals and the increasing specialization within the fields which has the effect of isolating professionals. These and other issues must be addressed both at the local and national levels and with the involvement of key leadership as well.

The challenge of recruiting and retaining professionals in the career of Jewish communal service is a perennial one. A large number of task forces, committees, and meetings have arisen over the past two years to focus on these concerns. However, alarms about recruitment and retention of Jewish communal professionals have been sounded for decades (The Developing Crisis, 1987; Wertheimer, 1999). Has any progress been made on this issue over the past generation? Have there been changes in career paths? What changes are still needed in the field?

To explore this question as JCSA honors Stephen D. Solender for his forty-plus years of service to the Jewish community, we sought to learn from Solender's insights and experience, as well as from recent studies about Jewish communal professionals.

Surveys of Jewish communal professionals today indicate a high level of job satisfaction. A variety of factors—the opportunity to work with the Jewish community, relations with co-workers, being able to make a difference and help others, a sense that the work is interesting and important—all rank high among those who have been polled (Schor & Cohen, 2002; Sweifach et al., 1999; Wiener Educational Center, 2002).

As Dana Sheanin notes (2001), “Those of us who are in Jewish communal service chose this field because we love it. The flip side of this is that we must continue to love

what we do to feel it remains worth doing.” Despite the psychic rewards of working with the Jewish community, professionals, particularly younger ones, experience many areas of dissatisfaction, high rates of turnover, and uncertainty about remaining in the field (Fishman et al., 1995; Schor & Cohen, 2002; Wiener Educational Center, 2002). Areas of dissatisfaction include low salaries and benefits, few opportunities for career advancement (in general and exacerbated by perceived gender inequity in this area) and for on-the-job training, lack of recognition of one's work, lack of status and respect, agency politics, insufficient mentoring and supervision, high workload, low institutional morale, a sense of unlimited and often unprofessional expectations, blurred boundaries that would otherwise safeguard time and privacy, and organizational contexts that are not family friendly. Sadly, many of these sources of dissatisfaction are not new. Similar frustrations were expressed in surveys conducted in the 1970s and 1980s.

REFLECTIONS ON CHANGE

This section is based on Steve Solender's insights from his long career in Jewish communal service. Contrary to common wisdom, Solender notes that salaries and benefits have actually improved dramatically across the field of Jewish communal service (This is also documented in Schor & Cohen, 2002).

Current dissatisfaction stems less from trends within the field, but rather in comparison to skyrocketing salaries and benefits in such fields as finance, technology, business, and law. Salaries and benefits also have grown at a much slower rate for professionals at the direct service level—early childhood educators, camp counselors, teachers, youth professionals, JCC program staff, family service case workers, etc. Salaries remain one of the most-cited reasons for departing the field, and our community and organizational leadership must find ways to rectify the situation.

Solender has also observed some troubling trends that may contribute to the frustrations identified by young professionals. Today, young professionals have much less contact with senior professionals and other colleagues in the field than they used to have. Executive directors are now much more externally focused—on community relations, on national issues, on leveraging public funding, and the like—and thus have decreased contact with their staff. He compares the situation to that at universities at which classes are taught by graduate teaching assistants rather than professors. Solender also observes that senior professionals are not teaching as often as they used to in local and national continuing professional education classes and workshops.

He suggests that increased access to senior professionals could have a significant positive impact on both young professionals and on the field as a whole. He recommends engaging young and senior professionals in small group settings where there is a balance between talking and listening in a low-risk atmosphere. Young professionals' motivation would be strengthened through greater exposure to senior professionals' involvement in issues of mission, vision, and the breadth of the field, noting direct contact is important for experienced professionals to share their creativity, vision, inspiration, motivation and perspective with newer workers. At the same time, executives could benefit from interacting with young professionals,

listening to their ideas and perspectives and taking them seriously. Such exchange could strengthen the professional practice of all involved.

As specialization has increased and the organizational environment has grown more complex, many professionals have become more isolated. Solender raises the concern that as individuals become "pigeon-holed" in their specific niches (e.g., fundraising, planning, communications, etc.), they do not see or feel a part of the big picture and do not understand how the organized Jewish community as a whole works. We have heard this concern echoed by many of our peers in other sectors of the field, who feel isolated in their community center or classroom. Lacking contact with their colleagues in other agencies (or sometimes even within their own organization), they have difficulty navigating the system, they are less effective conduits within the Jewish community, and they have a limited sense of career options.

Today, there is less cross-fertilization across different sectors of the field. Having worked in a direct service capacity, in an international setting, as a planner, an agency executive, and on the national level, Solender feels that the diversity of his professional experiences made him a more effective professional every step of the way. Each job built on the previous ones. The experience gained along the way made him more sensitive to client, agency, and local needs even as his responsibilities became more administrative and global. Today, many people who enter and stay in the federation world lack direct agency experience. Jewish Community Center executive directors have an average (mean) of 19.3 years in the JCC field. Young professionals who do choose to try to move from one sector of the field to another find organizations to be very parochial about issues of work experience. Again, the field of Jewish communal service hurts itself when it does not nurture exchange and growth across different sectors of the field.

Citing his recent teaching experience at

the United Jewish Communities' Continuing Professional Education seminar (CPE), Solender observes that young people entering the field today have a much more sophisticated background than many of their older colleagues. In a previous generation, the vast majority of Jewish communal workers entered the field with social work degrees and had little formal Jewish education past Bar/Bat Mitzvah. Today's young professionals possess masters, dual degrees, and certificates in Jewish communal services; have taken university-level courses in Jewish studies; and were involved in Jewish camping, Hillels, and Israel experiences. These factors have all served to bring a more conscious Jewish character and depth of Judaic knowledge to the field. New workers come with a greater diversity of professional training as well; MBAs and MPAs are becoming nearly as common as MSWs. New professionals are also coming with diverse experience, with a significant number entering Jewish communal service as a second career and bringing experience from the fields of marketing, business, law, and technology.

These changes in who is entering the field have direct implications for professional retention. Solender states that if we are to address effectively these retention issues, our responses need to be more person-specific to meet the needs of different types of professionals. For example, many agencies hold a new professional orientation for all new workers yet, a new worker could be a career changer who brings a wealth of experience from an unrelated field, a new graduate from a Jewish communal service program, or an MBA or MSW. The orientation needs to reflect this diversity. Because lay involvement on the local level in addressing recruitment and retention issues is so important Solender recommends the development of joint lay and professional committees and task forces to move the agenda forward in a community- and agency-specific way.

According to Solender, the organized Jewish community's commitment to professional development has increased signifi-

cantly over the past 40 years. When he entered the field, if there was any training at all, it occurred during evenings or on weekends. Nevertheless, professional development opportunities remain limited. Because of budgetary pressures, many professional conferences (including the annual Conference of Jewish Communal Service) have been discontinued. Attendance at other annual conferences (e.g., the UJC General Assembly) is often the privilege of more senior staff. Participation by younger professionals in such gatherings as the General Assembly is vital to professional development as well as for the development of camaraderie among young professionals. Solender notes that it was once common for Jewish communal professionals to attend the professional conferences of other kindred fields, such as social work.

Solender goes further to state that over the years the field as a whole has turned inward by limiting itself to Jewish events only. The sole gateway between many Jewish communities and other groups is now managed solely through the Jewish community relations function. He states that while the events of 9/11 and the community building that resulted from the tragedy have pushed the Jewish community outward a bit, we have lost the benefit of learning and interacting with professionals in other realms, which he identifies as "an important stimulus," as well as providing opportunities for exchange of ideas and practice.

Recruitment and retention issues are both local and national and need to be worked upon on both levels. Locally, executives should encourage their senior colleagues and make time themselves to have more direct contact with the young professionals on their staffs. Regional professional associations and young Jewish professional groups also have a role to play. The groundswell of local groups springing up all over the country—New York, Chicago, Baltimore, and Atlanta—reflects the interest of young professionals in managing their own professional development and in creating new constructs

for meeting their professional needs. The role of national organizations such as the JCSA and AJCOP in supporting and encouraging young professionals to plan programs, develop professional frameworks, and connect to national systems in a meaningful way is vital to the future success and engagement of younger professionals to the field.

We must overcome the challenges recruitment and retention places before us. As Solender says, "We have been bequeathed a system. We are our brother's and sister's keepers. We must keep it going."

REFERENCES

- The Developing Crisis*. (1987). New York: CJF Commission on Professional Personnel.
- Fishman, S.B., Cohen, S.M., Liebman, C., & Sarna, J. (1995). *Expectations, education and experience of Jewish professional leaders: Report of the Wexner Foundation Research Project on Contemporary Jewish Professional Leadership*. Waltham, MA: Maurice and Marilyn Cohen Center for Modern Jewish Studies, Brandeis University.
- Moses, L.S. (2001). Recruitment and retention: Imperatives for the field of Jewish communal service. *Journal of Jewish Communal Service* 78, (1), 4-8.
- Schor, J., & Cohen, S.M. (2002). *Centering on professionals: The 2001 Study of JCC Personnel in North America*. New York: The Florence G. Heller-JCC Association Research Center.
- Sweifach, J., Auerbach, C., Schnall, D.J., & Gelman, S.R. (1999). JCSA today: Results of the 1999 Membership Survey. *Journal of Jewish Communal Service* 76, (1/2), 11-22.
- Sheanin, D.R. (2001). Recruitment and retention: Imperatives for the Field of Jewish Communal Service: A young professional's view. *Journal of Jewish Communal Service* 78, (1), 9-11.
- Wertheimer, J. (1999). Jewish education in the United States: Recent trends and issues. In *American Jewish Yearbook 1999*. New York: American Jewish Committee.
- Wiener Educational Center of UJA-Federation of New York. (2002). *Institute for Young Jewish Communal Professionals: Focus group findings*.

The Jewish Federation of Bergen County And North Hudson, New Jersey

Is Proud to Honor

STEPHEN D. SOLENDER

*For his outstanding career in Jewish Communal Service
and his contributions to the Jewish community*

**Howard Charish
Executive Vice President**