

A PARADIGM FOR THE JEWISH FAMILY SERVICE AGENCY

New Assumptions about Traditional Values

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Few Jewish Family Service agencies today can survive financially with only the support of the Jewish community, and so serving non-Jews has become a reality for most. A new paradigm, in which Jewish values and sound professional practice continue to play central roles, is needed for the JFS agency of the future.

THE CURRENT OPERATING ENVIRONMENT

Within an environment of rapid change and scarce resources, the importance of social service delivery within the context of a Jewish agency is being questioned more than ever. Funders and community leaders ask why we should be using community resources for this purpose when there are so many other options for our clients, particularly those who can afford to pay for services. Would not the funds be better spent on Jewish education or for maintaining Jewish continuity? Since a healthy percentage of the social workers in private practice or in clinics are Jewish, funders wonder whether the provision of these services by a specifically Jewish agency is not redundant. Indeed, in 1993, the Indianapolis Jewish Federation disbanded its JFS, parceling its concrete services out to other agencies and creating a "counseling network" to refer counseling needs to a group of Jewish and non-Jewish mental health providers (Herman et al., 1994).

Competition for scarce resources is fierce, often pitting sister agencies in a community against one another both for local Jewish resources and external public support. Human service organizations are increasingly measured by their bottom line. Managed care and welfare reform have changed the environment within which we work and, for many of us, have placed our very viability as future service providers in question for the first time in our histories. Few JFS agencies today are able to survive financially with only the sup-

port of the Jewish community. Most have attempted to maximize the reimbursement available from medical insurance, fee-for-service contracts, fundraising, and government grants. Federation campaigns throughout the country are at best staying flat, with few additional dollars available to agencies facing dwindling support from sources outside of the Jewish community. There is, furthermore, a fundamental shift to privatization, as nonprofits seek to strengthen their own positions in order to receive funds from government or other resources. To compete successfully in this new climate, agencies need an unparalleled level of sophistication, business acumen, and leadership not unlike that required by other sectors in our economy.

WHAT MAKES A JEWISH FAMILY SERVICE JEWISH?

The Montreal Jewish Federation (1992) recently compiled a list of twelve indicators of what is Jewish about Jewish social service agencies, citing the clientele served, the cultural orientation and the religious values on which services are based, the composition of the staff and Board, and the sources of support. More recently (1993), Steinitz and Weidman have written that JFS agencies (1) respond to critical issues facing our community, (2) help people cope with life's changes by enhancing a sense of connectedness and Jewish peoplehood, (3) provide services that are in general, qualitatively better and more extensive than comparable programs in the

community, (4) provide assistance to the *entire* Jewish community, and (5) promote Jewish identity among Jews who do not feel Jewish and among Jews who want inherently Jewish services.

I believe that three major criteria make an agency "Jewish":

1. *its mission*—which should clearly state that the primary purpose of the organization is to serve Jews
2. *the composition of the Board of directors*—to maintain its focus on the Jewish community, the Board should comprise individuals who identify themselves as Jewish
3. *the programs and services offered*—which should target specifically (but not necessarily exclusively) the needs of the Jewish community

CHALLENGES FACING THE JEWISH AGENCY

We must earn and maintain the *heksker* (approval) of the Jewish community as being able to transmit and uphold Jewish values, but at the same time we must demonstrate an ability to find other resources that would enable us to continue servicing the Jewish community.

To address these at-times competing and contradictory demands, JFS agency leadership must constantly make critical decisions about funding and service directions. Many have reevaluated their mission and made modifications to enable them to reposition their organizations to remain viable and thrive in our rapidly changing environment. Our primary asset and simultaneously, our principal problem, is what we call "the J issue." While it defines who we are and what we stand for, it can at times be an obstacle to competition for scarce resources in the nonsectarian world. Kanner (1988) maintains, "The Jewish Family and Children's Agency is, and must be, Jewish by whatever standard of measure we use." This means that the agency should limit its services to Jews in most instances. He makes allowances for offering

services to others "because of our unique skill and ability, because the requirement of a grant mandate that we do [so] or because it just might be good public relations" (Kanner, 1988). He cautions, however, that if we do expand our services with the use of public funds, we should always be asking the question, What is the cost of these dollars to the agency and to its Jewish commitment?

This debate is tied inextricably to what at time seems to be an even more crucial issue facing the leadership and staff of our agencies. Our primary challenge is resources. How do we attract both the financial and human resources that we need to maintain vital and relevant organizations? The J issue "has a direct bearing on access to resources for the Jewish agency. Nontraditional funding opportunities abound, but all have the potential of changing many of the principles that have framed our operations in the past" (Nasatir, 1994).

Ironically, the more successful we have been in generating outside income, the less the Jewish community has felt that we are committed to their interests and needs. This has often led to a *reduction* in financial support and criticism of the agency's leadership. The key to maintaining our Jewish identity is not whether we use funding sources external to the Jewish community, but rather how the use of these funds ties into our mission and enhances or detracts from our ability to serve the Jewish community. If what we have to sell is our expertise, and the services we provide to the Jewish community requires us to generate our own resources, our market of necessity must be broadened to serve the non-Jewish community as well.

Serving non-Jewish clients has thus become a reality for most JFS agencies. According to Imber (1990), the major concern in offering services on a nonsectarian basis for Jewish agency directors is the "danger ratio"—that point at which the presence of a large number of non-Jewish clients will cause the Jewish community to feel that the agency is no longer serving its best interests.

Talented professional staff and Board members with the specialized skills we need to

provide superior service are out there, but they may not be committed, knowledgeable Jews. Kang and Cnaan (1995) have written persuasively of the benefits of having diverse community representation in addition to members of the group that is the organization's support base.

Once again, the question becomes, How can we provide for our consumers a culturally sensitive environment within which their needs can be met? To be accredited by the Rehabilitation Accreditation Commission (CARF) an organization must demonstrate cultural sensitivity toward those individuals served, both through staffing patterns and the composition of its governance authority (CARF, 1996). This would be true whether our clients are Jewish, Russian, African-American, or any other ethnic group.

For us, this becomes the paradigm shift, a shift in the shared assumptions upon which our practice has been based in the past. What makes us Jewish will no longer be measurable by the yardsticks we have always used. The question we need to grapple with is, What will be the next paradigm for the JFS agency?

OPTIONS AND STRATEGIES FOR THE FUTURE

As we struggle with this question, it may be helpful to consider these three models:

1. *Sectarian model*: Services are provided for the Jewish community only, and the agency is reliant solely on Jewish communal support. The agency is principally funded by the Jewish Federation, builds up endowment funds, and raises funds solely for the purpose of serving the Jewish community. It may use outside funding only if it enables service to be provided exclusively to the Jewish community. Agency professional staff and Board members are all Jewishly committed and knowledgeable. The size of the agency and the services provided are defined solely by the level of support provided and the unique needs of the Jewish population.
2. *Nonsectarian model*: The agency is in the social service business and sees itself as competing for resources and consumers with all other providers in the marketplace. Its mission has been modified to provide it with the broadest mandate possible. The agency Board and staff are chosen for their skills, expertise, and community connections, rather than for their religious affiliation or level of commitment to Jewish life. In order to attract business, the agency may change its name to one without the word "Jewish" in it, preferably starting with the letter A for maximum *Yellow Pages* impact. Jews will also be served, and the agency may even specialize in services that meet the needs of this population. The agency focus, however, is in maximally utilizing its expertise to increase its market share in its local community and beyond. Service will be provided to any purchaser who will pay for it on a cost-plus basis, enabling the agency to make a profit to cover overhead expenses, although it may still provide subsidized services paid for with grant monies from philanthropic funding bodies, including Jewish ones. The agency is fully licensed and accredited and prides itself on its consumer-focused orientation and its business acumen. Several for-profit subsidiaries may be in operation in areas where the agency has special marketable expertise.
3. *Hybrid model*: The agency has a high profile in the Jewish community, and its mission continues to emphasize the centrality of services to this community. However, the mission is flexible enough to enable the agency to serve others, either as a way to earn additional resources or for whatever other strategic reason the Board may determine to be appropriate. The primary service focus is on meeting the needs of the Jewish community, and the agency maximizes its support from the Jewish community for this purpose. The Board and staff are committed to the agency mission, but not all may be active

in the Jewish community or (in the case of staff) even Jewish. In choosing staff, the best person for the job is hired, taking into consideration both professional skills and training and the individual's role in the agency. If a heavily Jewish population will be served, one of the important hiring considerations will be knowledge and sensitivity to Jewish culture. The agency provides a wide range of opportunities for in-service training and consultation on Jewish issues for both these groups. Cultural sensitivity and a focus on consumers' needs and satisfaction are central themes in the organization, and special advisory committees may be set up where services are provided to populations not represented on the agency Board or staff. A range of services may be available on a subsidized basis (where community support is available), but others are provided on a full-fee basis, where the agency has special expertise to offer and where a niche market exists. As necessary, for-profit subsidiaries and DBAs (other legal names under which the agency conducts its business) are established to broaden the potential consumer base for the service. Checks and balances are in place to ensure that the leadership is operating within the parameters established by the mission statement. For example, when the agency competes for contracts in the general community, specific criteria established by the Board must be met. These could include the following:

- All costs associated with providing the service to non-Jews must be covered, and a Jewish population that would otherwise not be served should also be served.
- The agency has special expertise that is being purchased on a cost-plus basis, and revenues must be generated. These revenues must be used to offset overhead costs or costs associated with serving a needy Jewish population.
- There should be no moral or ethical

concerns attached, nor should provision of any service create tensions with primary funders of the Jewish community.

These models are presented in somewhat extreme terms for illustrative purposes. JFS agencies throughout the United States and Canada may fall within the parameters of these models or somewhere in between. The variables that determine which model they represent are community values and resources, agency size, composition of the agency leadership, relationship with the Jewish Federation, and the prevalence or lack of business and funding opportunities.

CONCLUSION

The Confucian curse, "May you live in interesting times" aptly describes the operating environment that JFS agencies face today. Social, political, and economic forces have had a profound impact on the values and structures that traditionally formed a secure foundation for our agencies. We are faced with the challenge of developing a new paradigm for the JFS agency of the future, one in which Jewish values and sound professional practices can continue to play a central role.

We must define together what the shared set of assumptions or belief systems will be. Central to this belief system will continue to be the primacy of Jewish values and the survival and viability of our Jewish community into the future. This has not changed much historically, and is not likely to change in the years ahead. What has changed, and what will need to be more clearly defined, is the set of basic assumptions that make up our new paradigm.

I would like to suggest several additional assumptions that could affect how this paradigm may look.

- *The era of exclusive Jewish support for our endeavors has clearly passed.* Agencies and communities must accept the reality that the resources needed for the provision of social services will have to come from

- increasingly diverse and non-traditional sources.
- Agencies will have to be run in a business-like and professional manner, with a high level of accountability both to funders and consumers.
 - The staff, who make our organizations successful, will be increasingly diverse, both professionally and in terms of ethnic and religious affiliation.
 - Our consumers will be drawn from the general population, depending on the economic necessities of competing for contracts in those areas where the organization has expertise. This special expertise will include our cultural sensitivity toward Jews and our knowledge base regarding their special needs. They will have a direct stake in our agency's success through profit-sharing and incentive plans.
 - Our Boards and governance structures will be increasingly representative of the constituencies we serve and will also be diverse—economically, religiously and racially.
 - Our organizational structures will be increasingly complex, enabling us to strategically position ourselves in whatever markets we need to be in order to compete successfully for resources and market share.
 - We will have a clear vision of the future and be proactive, rather than reactive, anticipating changes in funding trends and market needs. We will use this information to monitor trends and plan accordingly.

For each agency and community, the new paradigm may look a little different. Our challenge is to work together to define those

common elements that will enable us to face the future with confidence, secure in the knowledge that our organizations will thrive into the next century.

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THE ETHICS OF GAY AND LESBIAN ADOPTIONS

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The dilemma facing a Jewish family service over placing a Jewish child for adoption by a gay or lesbian couple can be traced to the meaning of the best interests of the child. This concept evokes value conflicts for the social workers and the Board members that encompass the obligation not to discriminate and not to be judgmental, traditional and contemporary Jewish perspectives on the morality of the couple's lifestyle, and the agency's mission to strengthen the Jewish family. The ethical dilemmas proceed from these value conflicts.

There is a turbulent national debate over whether lesbians and gay men are capable of being parents and whether they create homosexual children. A study by British researchers furnishes both sides with statistical ammunition (*New York Times*, 1996).

In another development, New York State's highest court has granted unmarried couples—heterosexual and homosexual—the right to adopt children. The decision involved cases brought by a heterosexual couple and a lesbian couple. In both cases, one partner was the child's biological mother, and the two plaintiffs sought full legal recognition of the other partner's parental role. This decision bolsters the legal standing of the state's nontraditional families and grants the child of an unmarried couple a host of rights and benefits from both parents. The law, however, does not sanction adoption by third-party same-sex couples.

This article analyzes the proceedings of a seminar for the Board of Directors of the Jewish Family and Child Service of Toronto regarding adoption requests by Jewish gay and lesbian couples. Although the discussion focused on the values and ethical issues involved, the legal parameters needed to be clarified.

THE LEGAL ISSUES

In Toronto, provincial law—the Child and Family Services Act R.S.O. 1990—permits one individual or two individuals who are "spouses" of one another to apply to adopt a child. The term "spouses," whether married

or unmarried, has been defined as persons of the opposite sex. This definition has precluded adoptions by couples of the same sex, though individuals, including gays and lesbians, could adopt. Recently, however, a judge found the definition of "spouses" unconstitutional for it denied the equality of rights protected in the law. Instead, he interpreted "spouses" to include members of the same sex.

All of the applicants are lesbian couples who have been living together in committed relationships for varying lengths of time. From the evidence I have before me, I have no hesitation in finding as a fact that in all respects these relationships might be termed "conjugal," in that they have all the characteristics of a relationship formalized by marriage (Nevins, 1995).

The criterion for adoption that homosexual couples are expected to meet is the same as those of heterosexual couples—to provide for the best interests of the child. The judge's interpretation has not yet become law in the provinces, so that adoption agencies are not mandated to abide by it.

The Metro Toronto Children's Aid Society passed a resolution in 1994 that same-sex couples should have the same right to adopt as heterosexual couples. The agency recognized that parental competence is not determined by sexual orientation and that gay men and lesbians are as capable of being good parents as anyone else.

By contrast, the Metro Catholic Children's Aid Society, to which only Catholics may