

"Impact! Soviet Jewish Resettlement"*

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Ethel Taft:

In addition to impacts on programs within the various functional agencies related to the Soviet Jews Resettlement Program, there have also been significant impacts on the relationships between these agencies, and between agencies and the Federation community, both professional and lay. I would like to turn my attention first to the impact that has been felt in the relationships between the functional agencies. I am stating the issues as they were experienced in Los Angeles.

Very soon after the entry of our community into the Resettlement Program for Soviet Jews, the two agencies, Jewish Family Service and Jewish Vocational Service, both of which are immediately related to the efforts to assist the immigrant toward economic independence recognized that the nature of the role each had to play was such that it could not be accomplished without thoughtful coordination. Though the agencies had a history of working together closely in a variety of program areas, never before had they worked with a target population whose values, aspirations and expectations were so difficult to comprehend fully. At the same time they

had to deal with the issue of developing goals for a client group that were acceptable to them and within the framework of concern for the community's expenditure of funds. This was further complicated by what may be described as different perceptions of the client stemming from different roles of the professionals in each agency.

The analogy of the blind men examining the elephant may be appropriate. Depending on what part of the elephant he happened to be examining with his hands, each blind man described the elephant in vastly different terms. In the early days of our experiences with the Soviet Jews, these two agencies were, if you will, touching different parts of the elephant. The Jewish Family Service worker saw a confused, frightened new immigrant seeming to require a great deal of hand-holding, and felt the need to address the issue of resettlement by attempting to help the immigrant regain his former sense of competency and status before letting go of the client. The Jewish Vocational Service worker saw, as his goal, helping the immigrant achieve economic independence at whatever level, as quickly as possible, with the hope that

his status expectations would be met as he gained experience over an extended period of time. These differences in perception, undoubtedly, served to confuse the clients, for they were receiving different messages from the professionals with whom they were coming in contact. It became apparent very quickly that both agencies had to devise means by which we could together take a look at the entire elephant, if you will, and evolve means of setting goals that would be mutually acceptable, both practically and philosophically.

What emerged over the years has been a network of formal and informal efforts to enhance communication between the staffs of the agencies as well as between the staff members and the clients. The staff of both agencies meet periodically on a monthly basis to review together those cases which appear to be presenting unusual difficulty in achieving the goals that have been set within the context of community fiscal constraints. In addition, on a case-by-case basis, the Jewish Vocational Service worker and the Jewish Family Service worker will arrange to meet together with a given family so that exploration of what each may expect from the other can take place when all are present, thereby minimizing misunderstanding and any attempt by the client to play off one party against the other. Though in all honesty, some natural tensions between the workers in each agency continue to be manifest, the encouragement of open communication has resulted in a sense of partnership, with each recognizing the strengths and, at times, limitations of the other.

Serving as a model for this sense of partnership was the way in which the administrative complements of both agencies recognized and acted upon the need for close cooperation and consultation in the development of policy recommendations affecting the client population. So, for example, when time limits for financial support were developed, they emerged

from ongoing discussions between the agency administrators, related to the extent to which financial support was realistically available from the community, the reality of the job market with which Jewish Vocational Service had to deal, and concern for client emotional well-being. Given the sensitivity of the administrative staff to the total picture, they were then in a position to communicate this to their own staff, thus enhancing the staffs' ability to work with each other in behalf of the clients.

This sense of joint undertaking quickly communicated itself to the other agencies in the community involved with resettlement, such as Cedars-Sinai Medical Center, the Westside Jewish Community Center and the Bureau of Jewish Education, and resulted in the establishment of inter-agency professional planning committees that meet periodically to review program needs, changes, and prospects. This has led, not only to more effective programming for the population to be resettled, but has set a pattern and tone for inter-agency relationships that in the long run will benefit program development for all segments of the community.

What of the effect of the Resettlement Program on the relationships between the agencies and Federation professional staff, as well as community leadership? The dynamics in this arena are exceedingly complex, and I attempt to highlight only a few of the issues as I perceive them. In the early days of the program there was little difficulty encountered by the agencies in receiving the dollars they determined to be necessary for carrying out the community's mandate to resettle the Soviet Jews. The standards and policies vis-a-vis resettlement were almost totally the province of the agencies. With the passage of time, however, changes began to occur as the result of several factors. The primary ingredients in the new developments were the tremendous growth in the numbers of

people to be resettled; the increasing dollars required to do so; the increasing pressure on Federation by national fund-raising bodies to divert less dollars to this particular resettlement effort; the growing sophistication and complexity of the Budget and Planning Department of the Federation; the impact of the debate around the final destination of Soviet Jews; and last, but certainly not least, the new ingredient of the Federal Block Grant.

It was the latter more than anything else that resulted in a new set of tensions that could be described as having made the agencies feel that the Federation system was like the man who came to dinner and stayed and stayed and stayed and stayed. The Block Grant, coming at a time when the numbers of immigrants and costs for resettlement were escalating and requiring the Federation's increasing involvement in the details of budget development, could only result in a growth of resentment and anger on the part of the agencies. The need to develop a process that would lead to greater accommodation between these entities if the client population were not to get caught in the crunch between seemingly conflicting interests has become painfully clear. The agencies have had to deal with increasing loss of autonomy in this program, whereas the Federation has moved into increasing involvement and exercise of power, with both entities having to keep in the forefront the need to avoid dissolution into adversary camps.

The recent cost containment effort has been a case study of the process of accommodation and some of its resultant impacts. When pressure, nationally and then locally, began to mount for containing the costs of Soviet resettlement—the reasons for which are well known—the already strained relationship between the funding body and the agencies that implement the program was further threatened. Not only was the program threatened, but for a while it looked as if the differences were

insurmountable. On the one hand, the agencies were being seen as too soft in providing resources for the client and insufficiently related to issues of cost effectiveness, whereas the Federation began to be viewed as concerned only with the cost of the program and not at all with the human dimensions and client needs. The challenge for the professionals in the functional agencies was to examine closely the cost effectiveness of the programs we developed without losing our essential concern for the client affected by the program. With us lay the real responsibility for bridging the gap between availability of funds and adequate support of the new immigrant until he is at least minimally resettled. At first, our attempts to help the Federation Budget Committee understand the consequences of severe cuts in program and to mitigate such cuts seemed to fail miserably, and we felt an utter sense of dismay. The dismay related not only to our feeling that our professional integrity had been challenged and found wanting, but to the knowledge that the recipients of our services would be seriously and negatively affected by the new program, leaving us with the sense that we were forced to administer what was really not much more than a typical public welfare program, an anathema to the voluntary sector of social service. However, the consequences of the decisions made by the Federation committee were felt immediately by them in that members of the committee heard directly from clients in the community about the harsh impact on them of the attempts to cut costs drastically. The opportunity for the committee to hear directly from the clients was the result of close cooperation between Federation and agency staffs so that such a meeting was essentially constructive and not a hostile confrontation.

Given the fact that by and large lay people who participate in the committee structure of Federation are in last analysis

concerned about the recipients of the service the community provides, they quickly began to realize the need to reconsider the stance they had taken. What is emerging is a growing sensitivity to the position that there is more to program and services than only monetary considerations. In all fairness, the agencies had to develop a more highly and finely tuned awareness of the economic concerns of the funding body, a lesson which should serve us well in the future as we attempt to meet greater demands on us for service at a time when the availability of funds becomes critically reduced.

It is my sincere hope that achievement of some degree of accommodation in this area will in the future, help us deal more creatively with the inevitable tensions that exist between the functional agencies and the Federation community. One thing we have learned from all of this, and it is certainly not the only thing, is that the lines of communication must be kept open, with each entity, not only ready to challenge the assumptions of the other, but also to reexamine the assumptions of its own programs and policies. If we can achieve that degree of openness in our relationships with each other, the entire community stands to benefit.

Doris Hirsch:

The process of assessing the impact of the Soviet resettlement program on the local agencies, brought the realization that negative impact generally resulted in positive confrontation of problems and ultimate enrichment of experience. Conversely, positive impact was rarely achieved without cost in time, energy and sometimes money. This report is made from the perspective of a Jewish vocational service and a Jewish family service in one large community; other communities may have different experience but we all benefit from a sharing.

On the positive side, the resettlement program offered an opportunity to test new

approaches and procedures. An example of this is the team concept developed by our Jewish Family Service in which a caseworker and casework assistant delivered a wide range of service to each Soviet family. Our Jewish Vocational Service instituted a Job Developer who worked in tandem with the Soviet job counselors to achieve an in-depth penetration of the general Los Angeles labor market and particular facets of the Jewish community. In each agency this team approach proved to be a means of successful service delivery. These models should be examined for applicability to other aspects of our work.

Equally positive in impact was the utilization of new types of staff who brought different kinds of work backgrounds and life experiences to the agencies. Financial considerations, program needs, and limitations on the availability of traditionally trained staff sometimes compelled the agencies to employ staff with less traditional professional backgrounds. While there were some negative effects which I will allude to below, the end result was often an enrichment of the total agency staff.

A significant plus was the opportunity to work with clients in a more total sense. Staff acquired a greatly expanded perception of the client as a whole person in all of his dimensions: family constellation, work potential, general approach to life. For Jewish Family Service this expanded perception clearly underscored the value of total family involvement in the helping process. For Jewish Vocational Service it dictated the development of a work plan which met the interdependent needs of the whole family. Here too we have learned something which should have potential for our work with other client populations.

Again on the plus side, we as professionals benefited from the opportunity and the need to work with severely limited goals, acquiring the skills to do that and ultimately to enhance our overall skills. Jewish Family Service enriched its knowledge and implementation of short term

service delivery. Jewish Vocational Service counselors sharpened their skills in helping clients to accept and implement short term occupational goals, often in tandem with planning for long range vocational objectives. The program required us to define more clearly the nature of resettlement and the limited goals that it dictates as compared to the broader goals of rehabilitation and counseling.

Certainly of positive value was the increased visibility which the Soviet resettlement program brought to the agencies. The newspaper articles, the Welfare Fund campaign presentation, the countless speaking engagements in which we have participated have dramatically brought the work of our agencies to the public's attention and to its participation in the solution of a major problem facing the Jewish community. Additionally, we have developed a much more extensive involvement with specific segments of the community. Jewish Family Service has broadened its base by an even greater use of volunteers and lay committees. Jewish Vocational Service has developed new or additional relationships with the public sector, involving itself with and impacting on CETA, Adult Education and Vocational Education on both the local and state levels.

Additionally, JVS made new inroads into the employing community, including new segments of industry and the professions. The total effect of all of this has been a greatly heightened awareness of the agencies and the services which they provide. Although this was not always an unmixed blessing, I view it as more positive than negative.

Finally, on the positive side, it is my sense that as a result of the Soviet program we have developed a much greater awareness of our feelings as citizens of this country and as Jews. Constantly mindful of the cultural and political systems from which our Soviet clients have come, we have had to identify American cultural

values as well as the values of the Jewish community, and to define a role in transmitting these values to our clients. In the process, we have enriched our own personal values.

So much for the "good" news, and on to the "bad" news!

Undeniably, the priority nature of the Soviet resettlement program placed excessive demands on the time and energy of administrative staff at the expense of its attention to other services. Expansion, innovation and even monitoring of day-to-day activity often had to be put aside in the process of solving the daily crises of the Soviet program. Additionally, especially in the early stages of the program, the disproportionate attention to the immigrant problems had an adverse affect on the morale of staff working in other units of the agency. They resented that they and, most importantly, their clients, seemed to be taking a back seat. Administrative staff has had to be constantly mindful of the need to maintain a balance, at whatever cost in time and energy.

Further draining the resources of administrative staff was the need to provide extensive supervision and training to increase the level of skills of staff with less than traditional professional training. This was most evident with Russian immigrants who were hired to work in the resettlement program. Where prior training did not measure up to usual standards, "professionalization" had to be acquired on the job. At times the process took on painful dimensions.

A decided negative has been the heavy demands made on staff energy, both physical and emotional, in this program. Constant and extensive pressures have been imposed on line staff by clients, supervisors, professional colleagues, board members, Federation and the community. As a result there is an ever-present danger of resentment, fatigue and burn-out, requiring patience, understanding and oppor-

tunities for collegial comfort and support.

An interesting negative has been the conflict which has arisen between the pragmatic and immediate goals of resettlement and the traditional philosophy of the agency professional who in "normal" circumstances aims to help each client to achieve maximum realistic goals. It is not only the Soviet client who is making compromises in the initial stages of resettlement. His caseworker and his vocational counselor have often had to settle for what they considered less than best for the client, hoping always that things would improve with time.

Equally of concern has been the need to deal with the resentment of line staff to a heightened involvement of external entities. The Federation, responding to short dollars and differing political philosophies, has imposed policies that line staff has had to implement. And it is line staff that has borne the brunt of client and community reaction.

An additional negative has been the reacquisition of the image of an "emigre agency." This has been particularly a problem for Jewish Vocational Service, which after years of establishing itself as an agency relevant to the needs of a broad segment of the local population, is once again being viewed by clients and employers as an agency geared to serve the needs of the hard-to-place population

which brings special problems to the job. To a lesser degree, this image problem has affected Jewish Family Service as well.

My final negative point is one that has just been born. I refer to the effect of the current reduction in immigration on staff morale. It is entirely possible that immigration will pick up again in the Fall (1980) but the significant downturn in Soviet intake at this time has made us all aware of the time-limited nature of this program and of the eventual need somehow to channel our energies and our commitments elsewhere. We have made a heavy investment of ourselves in this program and the process of phasing out will inevitably be painful.

As a closing note, I make two comments: it would be difficult to find anything to parallel the intense commitment to helping others to restore their lives that has been so much a part of this program. In another paper, it may be interesting to examine the ingredients of that commitment. And finally, the very cooperation with Jewish Family Service to assess jointly the impact of the Soviet resettlement program reflects a mutual respect and affection between our two agencies that has characterized this program for seven years in Los Angeles. The commitment and the relationship can only be viewed as positives which augur well for future undertakings.