

# IN THE BEGINNING: CREATING A LOCAL JEWISH COMMUNAL PROFESSIONAL ASSOCIATION

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*In recent years there has been an increase in the number of local Jewish communal professional associations (JCPAs). This article describes in detail the development of the Baltimore group and then outlines strategies for success and challenges faced by JCPAs across the country. It concludes with a call to action to national organizations about working together to better the profession and the community at large.*

In the last decade, the landscape of Jewish communal service has changed dramatically. National organizations have merged and cut back on services offered to local communities. Affiliated Professional Associations (APAs) have gained in prominence over more global professional associations, such as the Jewish Communal Service Association (JCSA). In fact, the last JCSA-sponsored conference was held in 1996. Tight local budgets further limit access to the remaining national and regional opportunities for professional development. The old adage of “you have to move out to move up” is less true, as professionals stay longer in one community, making both lateral and vertical moves locally. Throughout the country, recruitment and retention remain great challenges, resulting in an increase in the hiring of untrained professionals.

For all of these reasons and more, our profession has seen a rise in the number of local Jewish communal professional associations (JCPAs). There is a growing trend to support professional development locally in order to maximize available financial and human resources. Local JCPAs increase the professionalization of the field as they nurture and cultivate both new and seasoned professionals, sending the message that we

are a valued, integral part of the organized Jewish community.

At present, there is no formal guide to starting a local JCPA, which can be a daunting task without proper preparation and support. In this article, we share in detail the development of the JCPA in Baltimore known as KEHILLAH. We also discuss strategies for success and challenges faced by local JCPAs from across the country (Southern California, Chicago, Atlanta, New York, New Jersey, Delaware Valley, and Washington, DC) that we surveyed to create a “best practices” guide about the do’s and don’ts of creating such an association. Finally, we close with a call to action to our national colleagues about working together to better our profession and the Jewish community-at-large.

## **KEHILLAH: JEWISH COMMUNITY PROFESSIONAL ASSOCIATION OF BALTIMORE**

### **Start Up**

In Baltimore, the ground was ripe for a local JCPA. Efforts were being made to combat what was being termed “the de-professionalization” of the field, and the idea of

a broad-based organization committed to the retention of Jewish communal personnel was emerging. The Baltimore Institute of Jewish Communal Service (now the Darrell D. Friedman Institute for Professional Development-DFI) was already in place for recruiting new professionals and training them, but a gap was identified in continuing education, ongoing professional development, and networking for those already in the field. In large organizations, it was not uncommon to find employees of an agency department who did not know others in another department in the same building. A successful educational program celebrating the 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the DFI brought many professionals together, and the oft-heard remark was “we should do this more often.” From there evolved a steering committee of leaders interested in more opportunities for networking and building bridges. They shared a unified vision of an organization that would enhance the status of the field, provide networking opportunities, and promote professional education and interagency collaboration.

On the steering committee sat professionals from many local organizations and agencies in and beyond the local federation system. It was this group that determined KEHILLAH’s mission, purpose, by-laws, and governance structure. Early on it was determined that the organization would not be “owned” by the federation and that there be a clear effort to recruit diverse leadership representing the organized Jewish community at large. New professionals were identified and offered a place on the steering committee. This core group of twelve tripled in size and grew to include synagogue administrators and clergy, Jewish educators, and representation from local Jewish organizations in addition to agencies of the federation.

#### **FUNDING/EXPENSES**

The local federation, THE ASSOCIATED: Jewish Community Federation of Baltimore, provided a seed grant with the understanding that KEHILLAH was an inde-

pendent entity. Initially there was no dues structure, and donors were found for several projects: a directory, a recognition award, and underwriting a speaker. Also absorbed were underutilized funds for professional development from the federation. The main initial costs were related to marketing: developing a brochure, creating invitations, and mailings. After the inaugural year, nominal dues of \$18 were charged which were used to offset the salary of an administrative assistant and programming costs.

#### **KEHILLAH Today**

KEHILLAH continues to be housed, staffed, and administered at the DFI. Partial funding comes from the local federation, but the bulk comes from annual dues (\$18 regular membership and \$36 pillar membership) and additional fees charged for specific events. (Several larger agencies have chosen to subsidize membership dues for their employees to encourage participation in KEHILLAH.) Membership hovers at close to 200 professionals.

The Steering Committee, comprised of 32 members and representing community agencies and organizations, is governed by a Chair and three Vice Chairs, who act as liaisons to the nine committees and their co-chairs. The stability of the program rests in the succession of leadership of officers and the rotating Chair, who serves a two-year term with Vice Chairs in line to succeed him or her. The committees are Membership, Programming, Professional Development, Jewish Literacy, Tikkun Olam, Mentors, Recognition, Nominating, and KEHILLAH Young Professionals (KYP).

The Programming Committee plans one large annual event in the fall and one in the spring, which each draw approximately 150 people and typically feature a keynote speaker who addresses a topic of widespread interest. Breakout sessions provide opportunities for colleagues at various levels to share their reactions and exchange ideas. Elections and award presentations also take place at these events.

The Professional Development and Jew-

ish Literacy committees each plan two to three smaller workshops during the year, which are held over lunch and are designed to enhance professional growth and increase Jewish knowledge. Each of these sessions attracts about 30 participants, some of whom are new to the organization.

The work of the Tikkun Olam committee provides KEHILLAH members with the opportunity to engage in community-wide volunteer activities that benefit the community-at-large as we embrace the Jewish imperative to repair the world. Drives for greatly needed items are held at the larger events.

We have found that most people who leave the field do so within those critical first five years of employment. The Mentor Program was instituted to encourage retention. The committee matches veteran professionals with newer professionals to help ease their way into the field and provide an opportunity for growth and support. A fall training session is held, and the committee follows up with the matches, giving guidance and support. The students of DFI are integrated into this mentor program as well.

KEHILLAH emphasizes the importance of recognizing the accomplishments of our colleagues in the field and in our community. We annually present the Daniel Thursz Distinguished Service Award, supported by THE ASSOCIATED and the University of Maryland School of Social Work, recognizing outstanding service to the community; longevity awards to members who have been in the field 7, 13, 18, 25, and 36 years; and the Twelve Tribes Award, encouraging inter-agency collaboration. Shortly we will be instituting an award specifically geared toward new professionals.

The most recent development has been that of the KEHILLAH Young Professionals group, now three years young, which gives new, younger professionals an opportunity to network, socialize, and benefit from specialized professional education as they deal with subject matter pertinent to the particular stage of their career.

## **A BEST PRACTICES GUIDE TO CREATING A JCPA**

### **Executive Support**

Although many of the groups were founded and are sustained through grassroots efforts, all successful associations enlisted the support of agency executives during the early stages of their development. The local federation needs to be a key advocate, whether providing fiscal and human resources to foster groups or at the very least serving as a model to other agencies to follow suit with their support. Participation of top agency executives sends a message to professionals that they are valued and that their continued growth, both personally and professionally, is important to their leaders now and for the future.

### **Formal Structure/Governance**

We often feel that rules can impede the natural flow of things, but for an organization that relies on volunteers with packed schedules, clear but flexible guidelines are a must. The mission statement is a starting point from which a formalized structure can then emanate. This statement is something participants can always refer to as new ideas or programs are proposed. Are these proposals in keeping with the mission? Does this idea fall under the goals of our association?

A steering committee with multiple working committees allows for work to be divided and conquered so that a few individuals are not overloaded or quickly burned out. Also, as all of us know from our experience with lay leadership, people are more likely to be invested in what they help create. Finally, committees give professionals from different agencies the opportunity to collaborate and interact in ways that may otherwise be unavailable, fostering benefits beyond the actual programs developed.

A majority of the successful associations have a dues/membership structure in place. Members are often given discounts on pro-

gram fees and even exclusive access to certain programs. In New Jersey, members also receive discounts at local Jewish establishments. Some agencies subsidize the cost of memberships and program fees, another way for agency leadership to express their support of these associations and ensure their staff's participation.

### **Succession of Leadership**

Associations that struggled or failed repeatedly identified lack of succession of leadership as the top reason for their distress. Leaders were either ineffective with no structure in place for their removal, or they had no one to pass on their mantle to after a designated tenure. A vice-chair position grooms future leadership, as does a formal committee structure. Success should rely on collective efforts, not on the shoulders of a few enthusiastic, soon-to-be-burned-out individuals.

### **Attention to Young Professionals**

As mentioned previously, local associations are typically started as grassroots efforts by those on the front lines of Jewish communal service. Many of these individuals are younger or newer professionals who are looking for constructive ways to connect with their peers and colleagues as they establish their careers in Jewish communal service. The message this sends to those of us who want Jewish communal service to thrive in the next generation and beyond is that it is imperative to dedicate a portion of an association's programming to younger and newer professionals. This can be done through mentoring programs between newer and veteran professionals, continuing education programs, peer networking opportunities, and formal recognition of newer professionals' achievements.

## **INNOVATIVE PROGRAMS**

While commonalities exist among successful associations, there are also features

unique to different communities. Stemming from the varied interests, needs, and resources of each local community, several innovative community-specific programs have been developed. At the very least, these ideas can inspire our own creativity; at the most, these ideas can be replicated in our communities with modifications to suit our specific needs.

### **Baltimore**

In Baltimore the "Twelve Tribes Award" is presented annually to recognize an outstanding collaborative program between two or more local agencies. Such an award acknowledges the importance of inter-agency efforts to collaborate, maximize their resources, and combine their talents to create some of our community's most innovative and meaningful programs.

### **New Jersey**

Many communities give awards based on longevity, but New Jersey also formally recognizes its newest professionals with the "Leo Brody Jewish Communal Service Award." This award, a grant for study in Israel, is given to a professional who has been in the field five years or less and who is of "exceptional promise." The award is made to further the career of someone "already committed to Jewish communal service and Jewish life."

The New Jersey Association of Jewish Communal Service targets its efforts not only at individual Jewish communal professionals, but at Jewish communal institutions as well. It does this by encouraging "standards of excellence," recommending that Jewish communal institutions provide the optimal training ground and work environment to encourage long-term careers within the field. These areas have been identified as essential in elevating the field and attracting and retaining the highest caliber of professionals who are ultimately responsible for

guiding the Jewish community into the next century:

- Appropriate training, background, and education
- Mentoring
- Nurturing Community/Culture (provide a safe haven for problem solving)
- Continuous professional development
- Providing benefits: JCC membership and reduced synagogue membership, day care fees, and day school tuition
- Progression for advancement for the Jewish communal professional within an organization/institution
- In-house training seminars on such topics as stress and time management, health and well-being of the professional, creating effective interpersonal relationships, etc.
- Employee Assistance Program
- Recruitment of new professionals to the field
- Incorporating Jewish values and creating a Jewish environment, i.e., officially closing early on Shabbat

#### **Delaware Valley**

We have all heard of speed dating as a way to maximize potential dates and minimize time, but what about “Speed Networking”? The JCPA of the Delaware Valley (Philadelphia/Delaware/Southern New Jersey) facilitates an annual speed-networking program for its members. The executives of agencies throughout the Jewish community come together at a local bar where professionals have the opportunity to meet and greet each other. This provides leadership access and at the same time, it exposes executives to other agencies and their personnel, allowing for better cross-agency communication and understanding.

The region also benefits from the Tri-State Jewish Professional Leadership Program that helps Jewish professionals integrate professional responsibilities and skills within a Jewish framework. Participants choose from subject oriented seminars

throughout the year, coordinated by Gratz College.

#### **Chicago**

As an adjunct to the Jewish Communal Professional of Chicago, “Sulam: a Ladder for Women in Jewish Communal Service” was initiated with funding from the Jewish Women’s Foundation of Metropolitan Chicago. The program, now in its third year, was developed to promote gender equality in the Jewish communal profession by providing for the growth, advancement, and leadership of women. Sulam has developed workshops in areas where women professionals tend to have weaknesses, such as budgeting. The Chicago JCPA in turn promotes these workshops to its constituents. Sulam has also hired a consultant to create a manual on best practices for creating gender equality in the workplace.

#### **CHALLENGES TO LAUNCHING AND SUSTAINING A JCPA**

Earlier we reviewed the key “do’s” for a local JCPA to succeed. Just as important is a discussion of the challenges to starting and maintaining a local association.

#### **Executive Buy-In**

Many of the local associations are focused on developing the professional association as a grassroots effort, and through its success they hope to gain broader executive buy-in. In theory many executives pledge their support up front; however, in reality many do not play a significant role in encouraging their staff to participate, thereby sending a message from the top that this is important enough to take a few hours off to attend. Additionally, when executives make the time to attend such programs themselves, it is an additional hearty endorsement of this important communal endeavor. On a more concrete level, agency executives can also offer pro bono support for some of the association’s infrastructure, such as access to

copy and fax machines, support and business staff time, and the like.

We recommend that there be an opportunity to present the case for an association and appeal for support to the top executives of the community. Through an open dialogue, their participation can be invited and their involvement in developing financial support, as well as professional expertise, can be solicited.

### **Funding**

Many of the associations place a great deal of effort on securing funds from program to program. With limited "volunteer" time to develop programming, membership structures, and the like, it would be very helpful if the national professional associations could raise funds to be distributed to support local programming. Additionally, agency directors may wish to support the association through discretionary funds. Local groups may wish to approach local or national foundations for support as well, and a generic proposal from national would be useful as well.

### **Developing Core Leadership and Ensuring Leadership Succession**

Most of the existing groups were launched by two to three enthusiastic supporters who created and maintained the momentum. The initial stages of creating such an association take a great deal of time and energy. Several of the groups that are currently floundering are doing so because there is no one leading them into the next phase.

### **Volunteer Time Management**

As dedicated professionals, those who launched these associations devoted an extraordinary amount of time on top of their own professional responsibilities to develop the networking and professional development system. Supervisors sometimes questioned whether this work was being done as a "volunteer" on one's own time or as a professional on behalf of the professional

community and should be classified as part of one's job.

### **Lay Leadership Recognition of Validity**

What message is being sent to local professionals when a communal budget does not allot funds to support meaningful professional development? Does this suggest that a low priority is being placed on this issue and that lay leaders place a limited seriousness and validity on the development and retention of professionals? Just as professional leadership must indicate their buy-in to JCPAs, it is also crucial for lay leadership to understand the importance of the recruitment, retention, and cultivation of Jewish professionals. This aspect is a key component to perpetuating both strong lay-professional relations and a strong cadre of Jewish professionals.

### **CALL TO ACTION**

We encourage national Jewish communal organizations, such as the Jewish Communal Service Association, United Jewish Communities, and the myriad of Affiliated Professional Associations, to support mechanisms on the local level that enhance the recruitment and retention of Jewish communal professionals.

Local JCPAs have, for the most part, provided their participants clear and tangible benefits for joining their groups. The same cannot be said for all national organizations. Eliminating and clarifying the national overlap and highlighting the benefits of national affiliation would help both the national organizations as well as the individual members.

There should be more reciprocity between the growing number of local JCPAs and national organizations. We each have a lot to learn from each other. As we have seen in this article, there are issues that cut across communities that could best be dealt with on a national level. Likewise, there are challenges faced by national organizations that could benefit from an examination of local models.

We invite the JCSA in particular to take a

more active role in local JCPAs as it is the most comprehensive and overarching in scope of the national Jewish communal professional associations. Recently, a formal relationship between local groups and JCSA emerged. Local groups should consider allotting a portion of their dues for JCSA in exchange for national support. This support could include, but not be limited to maintenance of a national program bank, identification of and assistance with securing funding for local programming, access to trainers for professional development and continuing education programs, facilitation of a national email listserv and website for local groups to discuss issues and seek advice, advocacy on a national level for issues common to multiple locales, collaboration with national APAs and local JCPAs on the issues of recruitment and retention, and of course, consultation on the development of new local associations and the growth of existing ones.

### CONCLUSION

This article is meant to inspire, motivate, and guide our colleagues across North America to create their own Jewish communal professional associations. Appendix A provides an at-a-glance resource as you embark on this most rewarding endeavor.

We also encourage our national Jewish professional organizations to evaluate their relationships with each other and with local associations so that we may maximize the fiscal and human resources available to us in these challenging times. By working together, we can re-professionalize the field of Jewish communal service in the 21<sup>st</sup> century and ensure the success of our colleagues and our communities.

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*Editor's Note:* In addition to the local groups listed in Appendix A, groups have been formed in Miami, St. Louis and New Orleans.

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### JCSA RESPONSE

The authors have prepared a thoughtful and constructive article that can serve as a valuable tool for our field. They have made several recommendations that deserve response from the Jewish Communal Service Association (JCSA), publishers of this *Journal*.

JCSA now assists groups in their formation, provides speakers, and offers discounts for *Journal* subscriptions to local association members. Annual teleconferences have been offered to local groups to use for their own programming and JCSA has organized conference calls for local group leaders to speak together. The chairperson of each local association is invited to serve in an ex-officio capacity on the JCSA Board, and there are Committee Chairs for local group initiatives on the Board.

JCSA is currently engaged in a strategic planning process, and building a structure that recognizes, nourishes, and promotes JCPAs as a key area for development. JCSA is engaged in several initiatives that will assure support for local professional associations:

- A web site that posts news and information from local associations, as well as a comprehensive calendar inclusive of local programming; links to local groups are a key feature, as well as a bulletin board for exchanging ideas
- An active Local Groups Committee, which continues to provide support and information to local group leadership
- Continuation of JCPA conference calls

- Identification of national programmatic initiatives and financial support to enable local groups to implement responses to those initiatives
- Promotion of local activities and award winners, as well as recognition of outstanding programs and activities

Concomitantly, JCSA must work with the leadership of JCPAs to devise a structure that enables these associations and their members

to feel a part of the larger, broader field of Jewish communal service. Just as JCSA must respond to these entities, we need the input and support of our local colleagues for the greater good of furthering professional development and enhancement on a continental level. We all benefit from this dual, mutually supportive approach.

Audrey S. Weiner, Immediate Past President  
Brenda D. Gevertz, Executive Director

APPENDIX. Detailed information about specific local professional associations

|                              |                         | JCSA Article—Group Survey          |  |  |  |  |   |
|------------------------------|-------------------------|------------------------------------|--|--|--|--|---|
| Name of Group                | Reshet Atlanta          | Young Jewish Professionals (YJP)   | Jewish Communal Professionals of the Delaware Valley | New Jersey Association of Jewish Communal Service  | Jewish Communal Professionals of Chicago                       | Jewish Communal Professionals of S. California | KEHILLAH: Jewish Communal Professional Association of Greater Baltimore |
| Geographic Area              | Atlanta, Georgia        | New York City                      | Philadelphia, Southern New Jersey, Delaware          | State of New Jersey  | Chicago Metro Area   | Greater Los Angeles Area                       | Greater Baltimore area  |
| Year Founded                 | August, 2001            | January, 2000                      |  | 1970   | 1994   | 30+ years ago                                  | 1998  |
| Target Groups                | All professionals/Admin | Young Pros (1–10 yrs in the field) | All Jewish communal professionals                    | All Jewish communal professionals  | All professionals  | All professionals                              | All Jewish communal professionals                                       |
| Governance                   |                         |                                    |  |  |  |  |   |
| •Formal Leadership Structure | Steering Committee      | Steering Committee                 | Yes  | Executive Committee, Board, Committees   | Steering Committee, but nothing formal in place for succession | Executive Committee                            | Executive committee and steering committee                              |
| •By-laws                     | None                    | None                               |  | Yes  | No   | Yes  | Yes   |
| •Mission Statement           | Yes                     | Yes                                |  | We are embarking on Strategic Planning Process—developing mission statement will be part of that process | Yes  | Yes  | Yes, part of by-laws  |
| Mentor Program               | None                    | None                               | Through Tri-State                                    | Yes  | No   | In discussion                                  | Yes   |
| Recognition Awards           | None                    | None                               |  |  | No   | Yes  | Yes, for 7, 13, 18, 25, and 36+ years                                   |
| •Longevity                   |                         |                                    |  |  |  | Yes  | Yes—The Daniel Thursz Award for Distinguished Service                   |
| •Excellence                  |                         |                                    | Through Tri-State                                    | Saul Schwarz Award excellence over 10 years  |  | Yes  | Yes   |

APPENDIX. Detailed information about specific local professional associations (continued)

| JCSA Article—Group Survey                    |  |
|--|--|
| •Young Professional                          | Leo Brody Award—excellence under 5 years   |
| •Collaborative Effort                        | Yes—recognition of agency collaborations   |
| Innovative Programs                          | Speed Networking<br>Piggy back on other speakers, i.e. CAJE<br>Tri-State Jewish professional leadership program<br>Peer Assistance Program<br>Young Professionals Outreach<br>Sulam program looking at gender equality |
| Funding Sources                              | AJCOP, JCSA<br>UJA Fed of NY, AJCOP, JCSA, UAHHC, UJC<br>Program Fees Only<br>Dues primary source<br>Dues, Program fees, Federation allocation   |
| •Federation Annual Allocation                | None<br>Yes—all three federations  |
| •Individual Membership Dues (specify amount) | None yet<br>\$18 general, \$36 sustaining; special rate for students/retirees  |
| •Agency Subsidy for Employee Memberships     | None<br>For the Tri-state program<br>\$25—yearly; \$65—3 years; \$200—life   |
| •Program fees                                | Yes<br>Depends on agency<br>Bulk of funding<br>Yes   |
|  | Yes<br>\$18 regular, \$36 pillar<br>Primary source; different levels available<br>Yes—some agencies subsidize half, some in full   |

APPENDIX. Detailed information about specific local professional associations (continued)

| JCSA Article—Group Survey                                 |  |
|---|--|
| •Donor/Foundation Grants                                  | <p>Depends—some are free; some require charge—\$20 for members and \$25 for non-members</p> <p>Sulam program funded by Jewish Women's Found'n of Metropolitan Chicago</p> <p>UMD School of Social Work and the Federation subsidize the Spring event in memory of Dan Thursz when the recognition award is presented</p> |
| •In-kind Services   | <p>Staff time, data base management, accounting, mailings</p> <p>Staff time, data base management, accounting, mailings</p> <p>Staff, mailings</p>   |
| Staffing  | <p>Bier Judaic Seminar &amp; the Leo Brody Award are endowed</p> <p>Covers copies, mailings, phone calls, allowing staff to "volunteer"</p> <p>Leadership volunteers &amp; agencies provide that time</p>  |
| •All Volunteer (specify if rotating)                      | <p>All volunteer—on work time</p> <p>All volunteer</p> <p>Yes, rotating</p> <p>Yes, Co-Presidents &amp; steering committee</p> <p>Chairmen and committee members all volunteer</p>   |
| •Administrative Assistant (specify hours per week if p/t) | <p>Work time of admin assistants to committee members</p> <p>All volunteer</p> <p>p/t Administrator</p> <p>p/t Administrator—equivalent to 1 day/week</p>  |
| •Professional Staff                                       | <p>None</p> <p>All volunteer</p> <p>Yes, as part of the Darrell Friedman Institute Associate Director position</p>   |
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