

# VOCATIONAL SERVICES IN SOVIET JEWISH RESETTLEMENT: The Challenge for the Nineties

<sup>1</sup>MARK HANDELMAN, ACSW

and

<sup>2</sup>ALFRED P. MILLER

<sup>1</sup>*Executive Vice President, New York Association for New Americans, and*

<sup>2</sup>*Executive Vice President, Federation Employment and Guidance Service, New York*

*Given the changes in the American economy and the characteristics of the recently arrived Soviet immigrants, the traditional reliance on a strategy of direct placement into employment may be dysfunctional. Greater emphasis on economic development, innovative networking initiatives and specific vocational training approaches should result in higher placement rates and long-term job retention.*

New York City is home for 100,000 Jews who have emigrated from the Soviet Union since the early 1970s. Over 18,000 arrived in federal fiscal year 1990, and a similar number is projected for 1991. The responsibility for assisting these newcomers in their efforts to find work is shared by the New York Association for New Americans (NYANA) and the Federation Employment and Guidance Service (FECS).

In the late 1970s and early 1980s—the years of active immigration of Soviet Jews into the United States—the general principle of moving new arrivals into financial self-sufficiency through direct placement into employment was a strategy endorsed by both government and voluntary resettlement agencies throughout the United States and supported by Jewish vocational service agencies. Although small and middle-sized Jewish communities continue to report success with a direct placement approach that capitalizes on the willingness of Jewish employers to extend themselves to Soviet emigres, large cities have concluded that changes in market conditions and the characteristics of the client population call for a new vocational service strategy. A shift in emphasis from direct

placement to networking and a whole continuum of training approaches will be required for successful Soviet Jewish resettlement in the nineties.

The current downturn in the American economy has created large-scale unemployment and has placed large numbers of Americans into the job marketplace. These dislocated workers who speak English and possess American experience and extremely respectable credentials have the edge on new Soviet arrivals who traditionally seek jobs in technical and professional fields.

Comparison of the Soviet Jewish population arriving in the 1990s with those who arrived in the late 1970s also reveals significant differences that work against early movement into employment through direct placement. English levels of earlier Soviet arrivals were much higher, perhaps because many were long-term refuseniks who had prepared in advance for their migration to the United States. Current data from around the country indicate that most new arrivals possess little, if any, English proficiency.

Although the job market today is less favorable than in the 1970s, the expectations of current arrivals are unrealistically

high. They have been educated by those who preceded them in the value of "holding out" for extended language and vocational training. Unfortunately, these services are more readily available through proprietary operations capitalizing on government tuition subsidies (combined with extended income maintenance provided by the public sector) than from the Jewish community.

#### **BARRIERS TO EMPLOYMENT**

The barriers faced by these newly arrived refugees are daunting. Merely having advanced degrees does not guarantee employment in one's occupational field.

Perhaps the most striking and crucial barrier to employment is the lack of basic English language skills. Technical training is fundamental, but without the ability to communicate in English, employment is unattainable. In addition, NYANA/FECS has found that often employers are not comfortable hiring someone who looks or sounds "foreign." What is clear, however, is without job-relevant English—vocational English-as-a-second-language training—none of our clients is able to secure employment.

For scientists and engineers, in particular, there is another obstacle to employment in addition to the lack of English. The formal education received in the Soviet Union yields a degree that, for all intents and purposes, is the equivalent of a university-granted bachelors degree in the United States. The practical "hands-on" experience that many refugee professionals come with is usually based upon a technology that may be several years outdated. For example, computer programmers lack familiarity with American systems, American software packages, and sophisticated technology. Soviet engineers, whose experience has been in the area of physical modeling, are not familiar with designing computer-based models. Consequently, these refugees, who come from a society where their education and experience made

them well respected, find that, in the United States, their degree does not give them the edge that they expected.

#### **VOCATIONAL RETRAINING**

A receding economy and job market combined with a client population with low-level English skills and a great resistance to entry-level employment have caused direct placement rates in the large cities to plummet. A letter sent to the Council of Jewish Federations in July 1990 by the International Association of Jewish Vocational Services, states, "The world economy and the demographic scene have changed dramatically since 1979. . . . JVS affiliates report that approximately 70% of their caseloads consist of individuals whose English language capabilities are poor and whose occupational/vocational skills require upgrading or retraining in order to meet American standards." When provided, such training results in consistently high placement rates.

The NYANA/FECS classroom skills training courses in a variety of technical and business occupations, including book-keeping, major appliance repair, jewelry manufacturing, building maintenance, cabinet making, and furniture finishing and upholstery, have resulted in over 90% placement rates at the end of training. Similar results have been achieved in "C" language training for computer programmers run by NYANA and Bramson ORT. Bilingual training in computer-based business skills and architectural drafting yields slightly lower placement results, but has served to expedite the training process since clients are able to learn English and acquire occupational skills concurrently, rather than sequentially. Although the unit cost of classroom skills training has often been held to be prohibitive when compared to direct placement, it is clear that its benefits are also much greater.

Less expensive training modalities also bring a high return. NYANA's OJT (on

the job training) experience has been almost 100% successful. FECS is now implementing "industry-based" training whereby training is conducted at the employer's plant or worksite, which eliminates the need for any capital investment in training facilities or equipment. Recent experience with such an approach in the food services industry suggests great promise for this form of training. FECS will soon attempt to apply the "supported work" concept, developed in vocational rehabilitation programs, to the Soviet emigre population. Job coaches will accompany work groups of new arrivals to worksites where they will be available to provide a full range of on-site supported services, including instruction, supervision, counseling, and translation services, until such time as trainees are able to work independently.

Assisting Soviet emigre professionals presents an even greater challenge for the Jewish resettlement system. Although the United States faces a growing shortage of engineers and scientists, Soviet Jewish emigre professionals find it extremely difficult to find work in their own fields. In testimony given before a U.S. House of Representatives Subcommittee on Science, Research, and Technology this July, Phillip A. Griffiths, provost of Duke University, stated "We face a severe and growing shortage of scientists and engineers. By the year 2010, it is estimated that there will be 60,000 more engineering jobs than there will be engineers to fill them." In his testimony before the same body, Dr. Rafail Kushak, NYANA client, Ph.D. in biochemistry and in physiology, testified about the tremendous difficulty experienced by Soviet Jewish refugee scientists and engineers in negotiating barriers to employment without sufficient English language and job skills training.

#### ASSISTANCE TO SOVIET-TRAINED ENGINEERS

In New York, a significant and growing proportion of our clients are engineers and scientists. In 1988, the year when large

numbers of Soviet refugees first began to arrive, 79 of our clients came as skilled engineers; in 1989, that number increased to 1,325. In 1990, we assisted 826 engineers. The engineers come from more than twelve different specialties, including civil, mechanical, environmental, metallurgical, chemical, marine, agricultural, and electrical engineering. By far, the largest numbers come with skills in mechanical, electrical and electronics, and civil or structural engineering. In 1989, the last year for which we have complete data, 34% of arriving engineers were trained in mechanical engineering, 23% in the electrical and electronic disciplines, and 20% in civil or structural engineering.

NYANA and FECS are currently studying the metropolitan New York marketplace to ascertain which industries could be expanding, if not for shortage of qualified/trained employees. Although FECS has conducted such surveys on a regular basis for the last 15 years and has created technical training institutes in partnership with selected industries on the basis of the results of such surveys, this has not been done for high-level professionals. We are now seeking to find industries that can absorb Soviet engineers in related fields requiring a minimum degree of formal retraining and maximum use of on-the-job training. We are looking at high-level automotive repair, including hydraulics, mechanics, suspension, and electronics, and the telecommunications industries as two possible avenues for absorption and transfer of Soviet engineers.

In addition, NYANA has developed an Engineer Retraining Program to provide Soviet-trained engineers with knowledge of engineering occupational practices in the United States. Initially, we designed a demonstration program that offered short-term, intensive retraining in five engineering specialties and was funded by foundations and other private sources. It offered 72 hours of technical instruction, provided by Soviet engineers who had been living in the United States for several years and who had been practicing in their specific

engineering discipline. Instruction was provided in English with Russian being used to clarify points and to explain difficult concepts. Through this instructional method, clients had the opportunity to learn the subject matter with its corresponding English vocabulary, as well as to improve their general English language skills. Emphasis was placed on explaining the differences between American and Soviet engineering terminology and practices. Additionally, program participants received 150 hours of vocational English and job skills instruction that included an introduction to the capitalist economy, "networking" techniques, and preparing for an interview. The original program was funded to assist 96 engineers. We have now secured refugee social service funding from New York State to enroll 120 Soviet engineers in this retraining effort and foundation funds to help an additional 58 immigrants.

As mentioned previously, job placement figures from NYANA and FECS technical classroom training programs range between 85% and 100% of those enrolled. Placement into highly skilled and higher paying professions typically runs at 70% of enrollees. Of those who completed the Engineer Retraining Program, 45% were employed as engineers within 1 month after program completion. An additional 27% either found other employment or continued their education and training. It may take up to 4 months to place engineers in jobs upon training completion. Nonetheless, without training, it is improbable that many engineers could successfully gain employment in their chosen field.

#### ASSISTANCE TO SOVIET-TRAINED SCIENTISTS

During 1988, NYANA assisted seven scientists. In 1989, 101 scientists, primarily chemists, physicists, mathematicians, and biologists, availed themselves of NYANA's services. Through the first 9 months of 1990, about 100 scientists have been assisted. In addition to the more familiar scientific

disciplines, geologists, meteorologists, agronomists, and oceanographers, as well as those with highly specialized engineering talents, including printing technology and magnetic casting technology, have been helped by NYANA.

NYANA, in collaboration with the Committee of Concerned Scientists and the New York Academy of Sciences, has formed a Program for Refugee Scientists to help Soviet-trained scientists become integrated into the scientific life of the United States and to find employment in their chosen specialty. The program is supported by grants from foundations. Like the Engineer Retraining Program, it is limited in scope and size. Recently arrived refugee scientists apply to the program for selection as participants, which is based upon their professional credentials. Participants are required to secure a commitment from a university that will allow them to use it as a site for scientific research for a year's duration. There is no cost to the university. An award of \$1,000 to the participant is intended for miscellaneous expenses incurred while at the university and related to the search for employment, such as telephone calls, resume preparation, or library fees. Travel to conferences or for interviews is also covered by the award. During the year's assignment, the scientists pursue research and a job search. To date, foundation funding has enabled 25 individuals to be placed at universities throughout the country. Sixteen scientists have already secured permanent employment at universities for the fall of 1990.

To serve refugee professionals, NYANA has established an Emigre Advisory Committee, known as the EAC. Composed of former clients who have successfully attained jobs, as well as other professionals in the business world, the EAC provides liaison and networking connections for clients. Clients are referred to EAC members who hold jobs in the same field. They meet for informational interviews and receive advice about how to secure positions in the field. Because former clients serve on the EAC, they offer a dose of reality to current clients.

Current clients hear details of pursuing a position from those who have preceded them. In addition, NYANA provides clients with many resources to facilitate their job search—access to typewriters and word processors to prepare resumes and cover letters, access to telephones to arrange interviews, and a library of technical scientific documents in English and Russian.

#### HEALTH CARE INITIATIVES

The health care field offers enormous potential for newly arrived Soviet refugees. However, we are all aware of the many Soviet physicians who have struggled to re-enter the medical profession as doctors with relatively little success (see article by Vile in this issue). In many cases, physicians have passed recertification exams only to find the required hospital-based residencies unavailable to them. In the last few years, NYANA has had significant success in enrolling many Soviet-trained physicians in allied health training programs. Upon completion of these courses, Soviet physicians receive certificates that enable them to enter the fields of occupational therapy, physical therapy, respiratory therapy, and other allied health professions that have a shortage of practitioners.

In particular, there is a great shortage of physical and occupational therapists in the New York area. State agencies, as well as voluntary agencies, are finding it difficult to meet mandated federal health care requirements because they are unable to obtain the services of physical and occupational therapists. FECS is working with state officials in an attempt to obtain temporary certification for Soviet physicians to work in state and voluntary agencies as physical and occupational therapists for a given period of time while they are undergoing retraining for their formal licenses. They would work under the supervision of licensed physical and occupational therapists during that period. If approved, this program would not only provide immediate employment for appropriate Soviet physicians but would also offer them immediate

health benefits and a decent salary while providing state and voluntary agencies the physical and occupational therapists they so badly need.

#### NEW PROGRAM INITIATIVES

Resettlement agencies, whether in New York or in Israel, cannot continue to do business as usual. Soviet immigrants cannot be absorbed successfully simply by depending upon job development; that is, normal attrition in jobs that comes about as a result of retirement, death, or movement out of the geographical area. Economic development—the creation of new jobs by the creation of new businesses or the expansion of existing businesses—is now needed.

NYANA/FECS is now exploring several creative approaches to economic development. Many Soviet immigrants who come here with computer training, even when it meets American standards, cannot find jobs without relevant United States or, in our case, New York experience. The problem then is how to obtain New York experience when they have difficulty getting their first job. One resolution to the problem that we are currently exploring is the creation of a joint venture with an existing computer/software firm. We would channel business to this new joint venture. In return we would create a vestibule company that would be attached to the computer/software firm and would receive subcontracts from the firm much as a sheltered workshop receives subcontracts from local businesses. The vestibule component would hire Soviets with computer backgrounds to work for the company on subcontracts for a period of 90 to 180 days or, perhaps, a little longer. NYANA and FECS would then help these “graduates” obtain a job in the metropolitan area with resumes that would state “work experience in a local firm,” i.e. “Computronics, Inc.”

Under such an arrangement, the computer/software firm would have the responsibility of interfacing with the business community. NYANA and FECS would

also act as marketing agents for the computer firm in helping it obtain contracts for software development for human services, such as mental health, developmental disabilities, education, and home care.

We are also exploring the creation of a small business training institute to help train Soviets to establish their own small businesses. Such an institute would provide full supportive services and counseling in small business practices, such as financial, marketing, and personnel management. We would also undertake to find which areas of the local economy offer the best opportunities for small business success.

Through the International Association of Jewish Vocational Service (IAJVS), NYANA and FECS are sponsoring the development of a national computerized data bank that will list vacancies in science and technical fields. Every JVS will be able to enter data about job openings throughout the country, as well as client occupational profiles of Soviet emigre scientists and other professionals seeking employment. Software is now being developed to match cities that have jobs with clients qualified for these positions who may currently reside in other communities.

Finally, potential employers must be made aware of the valuable resource represented by the foreign-trained professional. Their technology may be slightly outdated and their English accented, but they are nonetheless a rich pool of workers available to fill vacancies in the workforce. The New York UJA-Federation is working with NYANA and FECS to make available members of the Trades and Business Professions group for consultations with NYANA and FECS staff. By working together, the vocational professionals can more closely match the requirements of

employers with the capabilities of the Soviet immigrants.

## CONCLUSION

Soviet Jewish refugees now arriving in the United States require effective vocational service intervention in order to achieve financial self-sufficiency. Primary reliance on a direct placement strategy *may be* dysfunctional, given the changes in the American economy and the changed characteristics of the client population. A shift in emphasis toward innovative networking and vocational training approaches will result in higher placement rates and long-term job retention.

World of Work orientation is fundamental. New arrivals must be appraised of basic economic and cultural differences between the United States and the Soviet Union. Once that is understood, English, vocational English, and job search skills must be made a part of all initial job readiness exercises.

Most importantly, expanded training opportunities must be made available, which may require rethinking of basic resettlement strategies at the national level. Additional federal and philanthropic funding of refugee-specific vocational training programs would serve to enhance the skills of those with professional and technical degrees who lack familiarity with American systems and the English language.

The resettlement of Soviet immigrants, here and in Israel, is of such scope that no one agency can or should attempt to go it alone. It is necessary to bring together all the community's resources and to use their collective creativity to integrate Soviet immigrants successfully into our economies.