

# AN INNOVATIVE MODEL FOR SOVIET JEWISH ACCULTURATION

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*To coordinate the variety of acculturation programs provided by its constituent agencies, synagogues, and community groups, the Baltimore federation established and staffed an Office for the Coordination of Acculturation Services. In its first year of operation, the Office has served as a clearinghouse of information, coordinated volunteer efforts on behalf of Soviet immigrants, and stimulated the development of a number of new acculturation programs.*

Since the current wave of Soviet Jewish emigration began in 1987, much has been spoken and written about the vigorous and creative efforts that American Jewish communities are making to reach out to the new emigres to help them reconnect with their Jewish roots and become an integral part of the Jewish community. The focus of this article is the innovative strategy devised by the Baltimore Jewish community to fulfill this historic imperative. Baltimore's particular approach to acculturation has been dictated by the Jewish community's large and complex infrastructure for the resettlement of Soviet Jews and thus may not be applicable in toto to other communities. Therefore, the intent of this article is to describe a case model, from which pieces can be selected and easily replicated, depending on the size of the community and the structure of its resettlement services system.

## CONVICTIONS ABOUT ACCULTURATION

Several strong convictions about Soviet Jewish acculturation prevail in the American Jewish community, which have guided the development of Baltimore's acculturation program.

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The first conviction is that the American Jewish community must approach acculturation more aggressively during this new wave of Soviet Jewish emigration than it had in the earlier wave of the late 1970s. Over the past 12 years, the community has learned a great deal about the cultural background of Soviet Jews and particularly how their attitudes about being Jewish were shaped by persecution and isolation from the mainstream of Soviet society and by the Soviet government's prohibition on practicing Judaism. Hence, a planned, concerted effort is needed to ensure that the Jewish people *will* regain the community that was lost to it. Most importantly, as much emphasis must be placed on fostering a positive Jewish identification in the Soviet newcomers as on meeting their essential resettlement needs of acquiring housing, job, and English language skills.

The second conviction is that the aim of strengthened and positive Jewish identification for Soviet Jews demands the commitment and involvement of the total Jewish community. Community institutions, organizations, and individuals must be motivated and assisted to provide a wide array of services and programs that reach out to the newcomers and expose them to Jewish lifestyles, observances, and traditions—in all their diversity.

The third conviction emanates from the first two. To help the new emigres reconnect with their Jewish heritage and become

an integral part of the American Jewish community and to achieve the broad-based community participation that is necessary to achieve this goal, a service delivery system must be structured in which coordination, communication, and cooperation can occur among all the organizational participants.

#### DEVELOPMENT OF A NEW MODEL OF ACCULTURATION

##### A Unique Acculturation Goal is Set

Like its counterparts, the Baltimore Jewish community set two goals for the comprehensive resettlement and acculturation program provided by nine constituent agencies of THE ASSOCIATED: Jewish Federation of Baltimore. The short-term goal—"to reunite Soviet Jews in their families and help them become established and self-sufficient with their new country"—is complemented by the long-term goal: "to provide an acculturation program which will assist the newcomers to develop and deepen their sense of Jewish identity and become involved in American Jewish life."

Uniquely, a third goal was established; namely, "to create a cohesive, coordinated network of resettlement and acculturation services, which includes all organizations and agencies within the federation system and the Jewish community-at-large and which functions in a unified and cooperative manner." Concerned that the delivery of resettlement and acculturation services involves many agencies and organizations, each having a different client focus and specialization, the federation's lay and professional leadership determined that interagency coordination and cooperation are essential for an acculturation program to be truly effective.

##### A Staff Position is Created and its Work Defined

To ensure that a systems perspective was initiated and maintained, the federation

created a new staff position: Coordinator of Acculturation Services. On the premise that resettlement and acculturation are parallel processes that must begin simultaneously, the federation placed the Coordinator of Acculturation Services position within the Immigrant Resettlement Services Department of Jewish Family Services. Having been designated by the federation as the lead agency for resettlement services, Jewish Family Services was deemed the logical choice for a central, coordinating office.

The charge to the Coordinator of Acculturation Services was to define and implement action steps within the conceptual framework provided by the convictions and goals underpinning the community's acculturation program. The first action step was to examine the "state of the art" acculturation services. Such other Jewish communities as San Francisco and New York had developed innovative acculturation programs and were willing to share their knowledge and experiences with novices in the field. Through telephone consultations and/or printed materials, a good knowledge base was acquired and reflected in a thick and handy reference file.

At the same time that other communities were surveyed, the coordinating office examined the situation in Baltimore. Key people in the community involved with resettlement and acculturation were consulted: staff at the federation and constituent agencies, community rabbis and professionals, and lay leaders of Jewish communal organizations.

These local consultations revealed the existence of considerable acculturation activity, coinciding with the dramatic increase in new arrivals, to complement the basic resettlement work. Yet, many other ideas and interests were waiting to be explored and developed. Nearly every person involved in resettlement and acculturation confirmed the pressing need for all the organizational and institutional participants in Baltimore's acculturation program to be fused into a coordinated system of services that could

be used easily, efficiently, and effectively.

Based on these local and national consultations, a work plan was formulated. The Office for the Coordination of Acculturation Services was given these specific functions:

- To be a clearinghouse for information collection, dissemination, and referrals concerning acculturation activities and resources
- To coordinate volunteer recruitment, training, referral, and recognition
- To provide technical assistance to organizations already participating or wishing to participate in the community-wide acculturation effort

#### FUNCTIONS OF THE COORDINATING OFFICE

##### Collecting and Disseminating Information

In order for the coordinating office to serve as an information clearinghouse, it was first necessary to inform the community about its existence.

To ensure that it receives abundant and up-to-date information, the office requests organizational and synagogue mailings and makes and receives endless telephone calls to learn about activities, events, or services being offered to the Soviet emigres. Baltimore's Jewish weekly, the *Baltimore Jewish Times*, and its daily and community newspapers are read carefully for pertinent information. Information is exchanged with the Jewish Information Service housed at Jewish Family Services.

The wealth of information that accrues is maintained on a bulletin board and master calendar in the coordinating office. An inventory chart, prepared by the office, includes the names, dates, and providers of all planned and proposed services and activities. This chart is updated on an ongoing basis, providing at a glance a complete picture of Baltimore's acculturation program.

Anyone in the community may call the

coordinating office for details about planned programs. To enable the Soviet emigres to have program information at their fingertips, the office develops and mails a Calendar of Events in Russian to every newcomer family each month.

##### Coordinating Volunteer Services

The second function of the central coordinating office is the coordination of volunteer recruitment, training, referral, and recognition. A key element in Baltimore's acculturation program is the involvement of volunteers wherever possible. In the belief that the one-on-one, hands-on involvement of volunteers will connect the new immigrants on a personal basis to the Jewish community, three major volunteer programs are provided by federation agencies: the Family-to-Family Program (coordinated by the Jewish Community Center), the Mitzvah Mobility Corps (Jewish Family Services' driver/escort service), and the Volunteer Tutorial Program (coordinated by the Jewish Vocational Service). In addition, the Jewish Vocational Service operates the Volunteer Clearinghouse, which serves as the centralized office for recruiting, screening, and referring community persons offering their services to the Soviet newcomers.

The Office for the Coordination of Acculturation Services serves as a resource to all agencies and organizations providing volunteer programs serving Soviet Jews, both within the federation system and the Jewish community at large. For example, the coordinating office worked with the volunteer program coordinators to develop an orientation manual and now assists with training sessions, which provide volunteers the background information they need to understand and serve Soviet Jewish emigres resettling in the Baltimore community.

As a focal point for all activities related to volunteer services for the Soviet newcomers, the coordinating office organized a Volunteer Services Coordinating Council. The Council is comprised of staff persons

whose agencies and organizations utilize volunteers in serving the new emigres. This group meets periodically to identify common problems and needs, determine cooperative strategies and resources, and develop guidelines and procedures for streamlining the referral and assignment of volunteers. The coordinating office represents the interests and recommendations of the Council to the relevant departments within the federation, such as marketing, community planning, and budgeting.

#### Consulting on Existing or New Programs

The third function of the central coordinating office is to stimulate and/or facilitate new involvement of Jewish community institutions and organizations or to assist those already involved in the community-wide acculturation program. For example, when the need for a particular service is identified, the coordinating office may reach out to community organizations that can potentially fill the need. After Jewish Family Services received numerous inquiries from people wanting to donate their used clothing for "the Russians," local thrift shops operated by Jewish organizations were invited to propose a programmatic response. The outcome was National Council of Jewish Women's "Project Latet—To Give," through which the organization's thrift shop obtains needed merchandise and offers clothing free of charge to the Soviet newcomers.

In addition, when a community organization or synagogue expresses an interest in providing an acculturation activity, such as a Welcome Shabbat or Bar/Bat Mitzvah class, the group may consult with and receive assistance from the coordinating office, such as outreach techniques, mailing lists, etc.

The prime example of the coordinating office's catalyst and facilitator role is the Rabbinic Task Force for Soviet Jewish Acculturation. Many community rabbis were voicing their desire and capability to work in partnership with the federation in plan-

ning and implementing the community's acculturation program. In response, the coordinating office organized a small task force consisting of Orthodox, Conservative, and Reform rabbis representing the Rabbinical Council of Baltimore and the Baltimore Board of Rabbis. Relevant staff from the Board of Jewish Education also serve on the task force. The coordinating office provides staff support for the task force's administrative functions, e.g., meetings and correspondence. It also serves a consultative function to the Board of Jewish Education and local synagogues which share responsibility for implementing many of the Rabbinic task force's program plans. These programs have included a highly acclaimed Purim Celebration, Model Seder Program, High Holiday Workshop, and most recently, a transitional family program which was under the auspices of the BJE.

#### ORGANIZATIONAL RELATIONSHIPS

The Office for the Coordination of Acculturation Services serves as the hub of the community's acculturation wheel with a link to all organizations and institutions in the Jewish community.

##### Relationship to Jewish Family Services

Accountability for the coordinating office lies with Jewish Family Services. The coordinator is a member of the Immigrant Resettlement Services Department and reports to its director.

Operating from a Jewish Family Services base ensures that the coordinating office carries out a fundamental aim of the acculturation program to be client-focused. By working in the direct service milieu, the coordinator is able to acquire in-depth knowledge and understanding of the complex resettlement and acculturation processes. The coordinator can also become knowledgeable of the cultural background and unique circumstances, interests, and needs of Jews from the Soviet Union and have access to client information that the

synagogues and Jewish community organizations require for their program planning.<sup>1</sup> In turn, the social work staff can learn from the coordinator about acculturation activities, events, and programs that they can then communicate to their clients.

#### Relationship to the Federation

The Office for the Coordination of Acculturation Services also maintains close ties to the federation, thereby fulfilling the aim of the overall acculturation program—to balance the client focus with a systems perspective.

The coordinator is one of three permanent staff persons reporting to the federation's Resettlement and Acculturation Committee. This committee, which includes lay and professional representatives from federation agencies and the rabbinic organizations, is charged with recommending community policy and allocating resources for immigrant services.

The coordinator is also a member of the Professional Resettlement and Acculturation Committee. Organized by the federation and chaired by Jewish Family Services, this committee assembles key staff in all relevant agencies to ensure interagency coordination and cooperation in developing and implementing acculturation policies and services. Serving on the federation committees gives the coordinator the critically important overview of the entire system, functioning both as discrete parts and as a whole.

#### CONCLUSIONS

Baltimore's model of interagency coordination and broad-based community participation, operationalized through the Office for the Coordination of Acculturation Services, has been judged a success by the community's leadership and funded for a

second year. The Jewish community justifiably boasts a profusion of acculturation services and activities, which involve federation agencies, synagogues, and other Jewish communal organizations, meshed into a cohesive, coordinated program that functions in a unified, cooperative manner.

The real key to this success of this model was the willingness of both Jewish Family Services and the federation to create and support the Coordinator of Acculturation Services position and to specify a background in community organization as a qualification for this position. It is conceivable that Baltimore's Office for the Coordination of Acculturation Services will continue to play a role in the community's acculturation effort. Given that the acculturation and assimilation of Soviet Jews into the American Jewish community will be a generations-long process, programs and activities designed to deepen their knowledge and practice of Judaism must be provided to the emigres beyond the initial resettlement and adjustment phase.

Before proceeding, several questions and issues have emerged in regard to second-stage acculturation that Jewish communal professionals in the Baltimore community and across the country will need to address:

- Once broad-based community participation on behalf of Soviet Jewish acculturation is realized, how can we maintain the interest and involvement of community institutions, organizations, and individuals over the long haul, particularly as new concerns and priorities surface within the Jewish community?
- How can the initial "one-shot" and short-term programs be extended, expanded, and/or modified so that the positive Jewish consciousness stirred in the newcomer participants is maintained and eventually heightened to a desire for learning and experiencing more of a Jewish culture and religion?
- What kinds of *new* programs, services, and activities can we provide to sustain or revive the interest, responsiveness,

1. All new arrivals sign a "Release of Information" form in an initial interview with their Jewish Family Services social worker.

and participation of the New Jewish Americans after they are established in their new communities and adjusted to their new environments and lifestyles?

- What are the *specific* goals and objectives the Jewish community seeks to accomplish with its overall acculturation program and effort?
- How can we demonstrate to the community's lay leadership the effectiveness of acculturation efforts so as to maintain their ongoing support?

The Baltimore Jewish community is beginning to grapple with these and other such questions. A central coordinating body, with strong links to the organized Jewish community, is certain to play a role as the community strives to address the long-term acculturation issues systematically and keep the current swift tide of acculturation efforts from ebbing before the community's goals are achieved.