

# A JEWISH COMMUNITY CENTER ADDRESSES THE NEEDS OF THE VISUALLY IMPAIRED OLDER ADULT

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*"Blindness is not a handicap. It is an inconvenience." This is the fundamental premise undergirding the Internal Light Program at the Jewish Community Center of Greater Washington, a belief that the visually impaired older adult can actively participate in life—at the Center and in his community and that a visually impaired older adult can continue to make a contribution to the community.*

**I**t is evident that there is proportionally more blindness among the elderly than in the rest of the population. In fact, inversely, age is the single most common predictor of the prevalence of blindness and visual impairment.<sup>1</sup>

Over one million persons, or about 70 percent of the severely visually impaired, are 65 years of age or older. The diseases that are the major causes of blindness in this country are associated primarily with aging. The increased life expectancy in the United States means inevitably our number of visually impaired will continue to grow.

The emotional devastation that seniors suffer with impairment of vision is striking. Blindness is often the last straw added to the multitude of other problems that occur with aging. The panic felt at becoming dependent and losing control often causes the blind or near-blind to hide their impairment by withdrawing into isolation.

The senior adult staff of the author's community center had found that a number of former participants used their difficulties in seeing as a reason for their absence from the Center programs. They

spoke of the fear of bumping into people, falling, or being laughed at or, even worse, of being the object of pity. They, or sometimes their children, stated that it was easier for them simply to stay at home. Isolation was replacing their socialization.

It became clear that a program suited to the visually impaired population was needed. With no model to guide it, the Center began its own exploration. Older people, identified as visually handicapped, were invited to participate in a newly developed social group. The group met once a month and by design was slow in adding new members.

The early group work process was focussed on identifying the participants' needs, fears, wishes. The group members began to be supportive of each other gathering strength and hope in the process. Additional individuals joined the group as word of its existence spread, some brought by their families. Craft projects were introduced and complemented the program of discussion.

After two years of experience with the group, its objectives were formulated by staff:

1. It teaches specific skills for independence, such as the use of the white cane.
2. It provides counseling both individually and in groups on the problems of visual impairment.

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The program, named "The George and Tess Hurwitz Internal Light Program," was initiated in 1972 at the JCC of Greater Washington through an endowment by the donors after whom the program was named.

1. M. Hatfield, "Estimate of Blindness in the United States."

3. It provides stimulating and challenging social situations.

4. It provides peer support.

5. It "mainstreams" participants into the Center's regular programs for older adults.

6. It offers cultural, intellectual and recreational activities out in the community.

7. It provides opportunities for its members to be of service to the community by tutoring in public schools.

Several groups are now possible; each group meets twice a month and is limited to 15 people, pragmatically determined as the maximum for this type of group, having one leader. Also, it was decided to confine participation to visually impaired and to exclude people with additional handicaps.

The program that was developed can loosely be viewed as having six parts. They are: socialization, self-help, help with outside resources, mainstreaming, outside trips and service to the community.

#### Socialization

Group sessions are twice a month, four hours each, throughout the year. Participants not only share their problems, solutions, etc., but their phone numbers, as well. Many become friends. Eating lunch together is an important part of the socialization. For many it is one of the few meals not eaten alone.

Members are encouraged to talk to each other between sessions and prove to be mutually helpful. In one group, a woman totally blind for two years calls a new friend whose sight is diminishing and who is acutely depressed. They chat about the weather, the news, and the like but the caller also gets her message across: there are worse things in life than blindness. Helpful supports such as this are crucial outgrowths of socialization in the program.

#### Self-Help

Monthly on-site get-togethers offer the greatest opportunity for participants learn-

ing to handle the day-to-day trials and tribulations associated with visual impairment. These meetings, carefully planned in advance, consist of peer "rap" sessions led by the group director. They deal factually with blindness and personal health concerns and counsel on individual emotional problems, family and other relationships, necessary decision-making. There are also sessions dealing with skills for daily living taught either by the group's director or by a specialist brought in from one of the cooperating agencies for the blind or aged. The latter also familiarizes the members with the agencies' services.

#### Outside-Help

Making use of outside resources in the larger community, the director of the program has brought in teachers or speakers from the Office of Vocational Rehabilitation, a residence for the blind, a college, and Volunteers for the Visually Handicapped.

The kind of information thus made available is exemplified by the subject of the "white cane". Many members recoiled at the thought of using a conspicuous mark of their disability. They did not want the "pity" or "attention" a cane would occasion. The speaker tried to counter these sentiments with the many advantages of its use.

One of the members confessed to her fears during journeys at dusk when even her very limited vision deserts her. She was convinced by the speaker to investigate the possible use of a cane.

Other self-help talks have dealt with cooking, "how-tos": how to use a knife, how to set up a kitchen and so forth. Emphasis was placed on the need to develop a keen sense of smell and a healthy fear of fire. The speaker encouraged many people to practice techniques.

Another speaker discussed grooming and dress; giving also such hints as how to line up colors in a drawer as a help in finding correct colors to wear. Members exchanged humorous stories about

mistakes made in choice of clothing, the shared humor giving them some feeling of relief.

Other speakers have discussed issues such as housing for the blind, legislation pending in Congress relating to the blind and services available in the community of which members may not have been aware. Equipment such as talking books, special "reading" devices and lenses are sometimes demonstrated and even lent to participants.

#### Mainstreaming

Although members develop strong group feeling and enjoy mutual support in their shared handicap, it was felt that their participation also in programs with the sighted would be a plus. Since group meets on the same day as the Center regular program for older adults is conducted, Internal Light members often attend lectures and discussion groups along with the sighted. Tickets to cultural programs are made available to them and they are encouraged to participate also in the Center's Judaic programs.

An interesting outgrowth of the mainstreaming concept occurred at one of the satellite programs where the sighted group sits in on discussions led by the blind. Their attendance made them more aware of the needs and feelings of visually impaired people. A teen club has invited Internal Light members to their get-togethers where a lively exchange of views has taken place.

#### Trips

One of the exciting advantages of the program has been the chance afforded members to travel and see places. Once a month excursions have taken the group to the Capitol, the White House and the Library of Congress. On each of those special tours, guides let group members touch or even hear what ordinary guests were not permitted.

A trip to a garden allowed them to touch and smell, and also made them

aware of the installed braille markers.

Other places visited included the Supreme Court, the Commission on Aging, a college campus, the African Museum, the Kennedy Center, the Air and Space Museum, the Israeli Embassy, a winery, the Audubon Society, a dinner theater, a boat ride and an art gallery. Our particular community affords unusual resources for sightseeing trips, but any community surely has some interesting sites to which tours are possible. Lunch or refreshments add to the pleasure of such visits. In our program volunteer assistants are always recruited for the trips. It is an assignment most volunteers enjoy.

#### Service to the Community

The newest and possibly the most valuable component in the *Internal Light Program* is that of the group member's assumption of the role of volunteer to help others. It was decided by staff that members would give and gain the most in helping youngsters.

Permission was obtained for Internal Light members to go into the elementary schools as tutors. At first, the step was met with resistance, but a cooperative, caring principal was found and the tutoring program launched. The Retired Senior Volunteers Program provides funds for the transportation and lunches for the tutors and also provides volunteers to bring children from classroom to the central work area of the tutors. Two schools house the program. Each has an interested, dynamic, exceptionally competent principal (essential to the success of the program) who views the program as an opportunity to give children from working-parent homes, or from homes of newly-arrived immigrants thirty minutes of an undivided, one-to-one relationship with an adult, a rare opportunity for many of them.

The practice is for a tutor to work with each child for one half hour, usually totalling three children a morning. The child reads aloud. When he stumbles on a

word, the tutor asks him to spell the word, then pronounces it and asks the child to repeat it until the child has acquired its correct pronunciation and its meaning. In addition, skilled tutors ask for summaries of the stories and ask questions challenging comprehension. The tutor always spends a few minutes talking with the child about personal matters. It is not unusual for a child to develop an almost familial feeling for the senior adult. Even when the children do not see the same tutor again, the teachers report that their students benefit from the program.

The tutors themselves feel stimulated and very needed. The value of the tutoring program to the older people is obvious in their willingness to participate and in the caring and warmth they bring to the children. It is an extra bonus of the program that is also helps meet the children's need for attention and approval. Both children and tutors feel enhanced; each feels that he or she is contributing to the other.

The director of the Center's program is a key to its success. The role is one of friend, teacher, recruiter, advisor and organizer. He or she must keep abreast of

what is new in help for the visually impaired, must carry out the daily administration of the program, and establish and maintain relationships with cooperating community-based organizations. He or she makes the public aware of the program through contacts with the media (news reports, TV programs) and communications to public officials.

The success of the program has been evident in consistent attendance, positive feedback, growth of the participants, growing waiting lists and the very positive attitude and atmosphere associated with the program.

At the request of a University Center of Aging, the community center collaborated with the university center to secure a grant from the state Board of Higher Education. The grant provided for the replication of the Jewish community center's program in four sites elsewhere in the state. Candidates for the program were selected by nominations of the state Department of Vocational Rehabilitation. Group leaders were hired and trained at the University according to the Center's curriculum. The grant, a one-year demonstration project, renewable only for one additional year, was renewed an unprecedented three times.