

Economic Crisis or Economic Change: The Unemployed Jewish Middle Income Wage Earner*

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It is most critical that the Jewish community recognize that protracted economic change augurs a continuing need to deliver placement services to middle-income unemployed beyond the current period of reported economic recovery. While some community leaders are experiencing growth in their own businesses, technological and economic currents are altering the landscape of industrial and corporate development, while federal deficit remediation is inhibiting the non-profit service sector.

THE evolution of occupational choice among many successful Jewish job holders reveals today's economic dilemma as well as the difficulties in maintaining continued Jewish community support for middle-income unemployment programs.

The traditional occupational path to success associated with Jews in America during the first two decades following World War II was self-employment either in specific professions (medical, dental, etc.) or entrepreneurial pursuits. While Jews initially did not gain admission into the "sanctum sanctorum" of the American business world—the corporations—they did assume their customary diaspora role of managing finances and serving small businesses as CPA's stock brokers, and attorneys. Much of our community leadership has come from these occupational groupings of professions and self made enterprises.

Those with a different bent followed the other traditional Jewish occupational paths in the non-profit sector to become scholars, teachers, researchers

and human service workers. Par-enthetically, the Jews in the aforementioned private sector occupations and the human service workers helped to create the field of Jewish Communal Service. No American societal group has so effectively collected money and designed and delivered social services as the Jewish philanthropies have done through its federated system of agencies. Modern sophisticated comprehensive vocational counseling programs were principally developed by the JVS field.

However, in time, as the discriminatory barriers came down, Jews began to move into the total economic configuration of the United States, including corporate life, both as management and/or technical employees (e.g. engineers, chemists, pharmacologists and related technical sales).

In the past decade, the National Association of Jewish Vocational Services (NAJVS) in cooperation with the American Jewish Committee, promoted the "Executive Suite Programs" throughout the United States to spur the movement of Jews into corporate life by modifying discriminatory labor practices. In New Jersey we have had a continued corporate growth rate as a flash flood of development has pushed into exurbia leaving a trail of industrial parks in former farm lands. With this

growth, many Jews found successful occupational paths to high middle-income positions without necessitating self-employment in their own businesses or professions.

The unhappy paradox of having more doors open has left this group most vulnerable to today's changing economic conditions. As corporations trim, realign, automate, acquire and divest, the resulting lay offs affect Jews both on the managerial and technical planes. In tandem with these changes, a penurious federal government has cut into America's academy, America's social programs and America's commitment to its less advantaged as the current political climate undervalues higher learning and social justice. Consequently, the traditional non-profit occupational families heavily invested with Jewish professionals—the teachers, the researchers and the human service workers—are in the job crunch as well.

In the early 1980's the staff and board of JVS MetroWest NJ alerted the local Jewish Federation to the growing number of Jewish middle-income wage earners who were in serious trouble. This was evidenced as married as well as single-parent Jewish women were seeking careers because of financial pressures; as requests for scholarship aid were increasing; as business failures were on the upswing in the Jewish community and as the recession was causing lay-offs of middle-management people, particularly those associated with manufacturing. Their profile is familiar—college degrees, steady work histories, stable families, etc. Similar concern was voiced by staffs of other JVS agencies across the country and resulted in a national resolution passed by the National Association of Jewish Vocational Services at its 1982 Annual Meeting, calling upon the organized Jewish communities to develop services to meet this need. Both the Council of Jewish Federations

and the American Jewish Committee placed this issue on their respective agendas.

In 1983 the United Jewish Federation of MetroWest NJ appropriated emergency funds for a program of modest size entitled the Career Placement Unit of JVS to serve this new unemployed group. In the first sixteen months this program served 215 individuals with 65 placed on jobs. Today this caseload continues to grow despite the reported economic "recovery." It is apparent that the "recovery" is a selective one to which not all of the unemployed are responsive. In New Jersey, with unemployment dropping to six percent, we currently find the following occupational areas not responsive to the recovery: *manufacturing*—all areas; *engineering*—petro chemical, chemical and pharmaceutical; *human resource workers* (in the profit sector)—personnel, recruiting, training and employee relations; *research*—genetics, bio-chemistry, pharmacology, toxicology and molecular research; *education*—teaching and administrative and *non-profit services*—management and practitioners from private and government funded programs. The age range of these clients is 25–50 years (average of 35) with previous salaries of \$25,000. to \$60,000. (average of \$30,000). The occupational backgrounds of our clients are reflective of these distressed areas of employment. In the past month major local New Jersey employers in manufacturing, pharmaceuticals, chemicals and universities have announced forthcoming personnel cutbacks (euphemistically called reductions in force, RIF) to wholesale lay-offs.

The approach to servicing this clientele is not traditional job matching and telephone placement. This agency hired a human service worker who had experience with a commercial employment firm and who projects a corporate demeanor. This professional has the

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facility to assist clients in relearning how to address the labor market, constructing letters of introduction, developing functional resumés based on transferable skills, improving job search strategies and making better use of existing occupational networks. The JVS Career Placement Service is presented to the employer community as a professional resource to serve their skilled manpower needs.

To augment the efforts of staff, a Community Business Advisory Committee was developed from a select group of Jewish business and professional leaders. The committee selection process was enlarged by utilizing the leadership list of the United Jewish Federation which broadened the program's outreach beyond the JVS Board. This process not only enriched the program's cadre of business experts but aided in disseminating information regarding the need for the service to the overall Jewish community leadership. This group meets with the agency staff and JVS placement committee board representatives on a periodic basis to review the program's marketing strategies, to provide direct job leads and to offer their particular expertise to those unemployed with speciality backgrounds (e.g. chemical engineers, technical sales, etc.). Such blue ribbon committees can become ornamental unless staff generates purposeful activity. In our community we have found such involvement to be most effective.

There are preventative steps JVS agencies can take, along with immediate job placement programs. The career-educational and/or vocational counseling departments of our fellow agencies, in their work with high school students choosing a college, women returning to the labor market and adults seeking new careers, must consider activity beyond assessing cerebral capacity and hearts' desires. In addition to aptitudes and

interests, counselors must be cognizant of labor trends both local and national. They must be aware of growth occupations, replacement occupations and dead-ended job fields. JVS MetroWest is subscribing to a computerized state sponsored Career Information Delivery System (CIDS) accessed through a CRT terminal at the agency. This system not only delivers college information but is keyed into the N.J. Dept. of Labor for employment trends in the State, industries in N.J. which utilize specific career fields, sample firms, earning potentials and required educational/vocational preparation. This may not be what some of our affect-related counselors were trained to deal with, but to help clients confront our changing economy, such activity has to be mandated professional baggage.

Our own NAJVS network could assist in the search for particular jobs by flagging for its constituent agencies local area growth industries for clients who have to relocate.

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The *Talmud's* dictum on *tsedakah* obligates a Jew first to help one's self—so that one will have the resources to fulfill the obligation of *tsedakah* to others less endowed. It is valid to invest philanthropic funds in this group. These middle-income clients are us; they are the Jewish wage-earners who have not

faced periods of unemployment and have never had to rely on others for assistance. They support our Jewish Centers, our synagogues, and, perhaps not in five figures, our local fund drives. They are the stable elements in our community, the building blocks we can ill afford to discard lest we create irreparable fissures in the foundations of our communal life. This is not yesterday's problem; it is in fact a part of our future.

Calendar for 1986

Eighty-Eighth Annual Meeting

Conference of Jewish Communal Service

Cleveland

May 25-28, 1986

Information: 111 Prospect St., E. Orange, N.J. 07017