

## COMING TO MIAMI:

### The Domestic Impact of the Crisis in Argentina

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*Over the past three years, nearly 3,000 Jews from Argentina—few with automatic legal status or permission to work—have settled in Miami. The greatest challenge for professionals is to find the balance between conflicting values, approaches, and communal objectives, as well as between deliberative planning and immediate response. Another challenge is to protect our agencies from being construed as abetting people who are here illegally.*

Most of the American Jewish community is aware of the problems facing the Jewish community in Argentina and of the related aliyah to Israel. There is also a small but significant movement of Jews from Argentina and other Latin American countries to the United States and to Miami in particular. Some 2,500 to 3,000 Jews from Argentina have arrived in Miami during the last 3 years. In addition, several hundred others have arrived from other South American countries. Complicating this migration is the fact that unlike other resettlement efforts, Jews from Latin America are not considered refugees. Few arrive with automatic legal status, permission to work, or federal matching funds for their resettlement.

This article highlights some of the issues related to the arrival in Miami of Jews from Argentina. Jews from other Latin countries pose other challenges. The professional roles in the absorption process constantly change, but the challenge remains the same: to help both the arriving families and to enhance our community in the process.

As Jewish communal professionals, we face the greatest challenges in helping community leaders, our agencies, and our colleagues address the needs of this population and to find the balance among conflicting values, approaches, and communal objectives. We also struggle with the need to strike a balance between thoughtful and deliberative planning, and immediate response.

One of the initial challenges we faced was

in determining how migration to Miami fit in with the overall responsibility the Miami community has to the national collective effort for Argentine aliyah and relief in Argentina. We had to help federation leadership determine how to respond to these different responsibilities. Clearly, it is in our interest to encourage aliyah and to seek maximum resources for relief in Argentina. However, we recognized that not all Argentine Jews were going to make aliyah or were willing to remain in Argentina during these difficult times.

To encourage aliyah, we work closely with the aliyah shaliach and with the Jewish Agency, providing them with access to the new arrivals from Argentina and providing short-term assistance to those who need help while waiting for a flight to Israel. (The Jewish Agency treats Argentines who have been in Miami for less than 12 months and choose to make aliyah to Israel as if they are making aliyah from Argentina.) The Miami community also conducted a very successful Israel Emergency Campaign that included special funding for Argentine aliyah. Other targeted funds were raised to meet our obligations to the effort in Argentina. A separate grant from the Foundation of Jewish Philanthropies was used to address the local needs related to absorbing Argentines in Miami.

In addition, we had to help community leadership understand and realize their need to fulfill the moral and religious obligations

to the Jews from Argentina and other Latin American countries. Among the concerns leadership articulated were that no one be without food and shelter and that assistance be provided to help these new arrivals remain connected to Jewish life. Within that framework, professionals had to help community leaders determine the limits of the assistance we could provide and the best means of providing help to achieve those objectives. To what extent could we fulfill the expectation that no one would be hungry or homeless if the Argentine arrivals arrived here without the possibility of employment?

In the current economic environment, it is difficult to create a large pool of jobs for the Argentine Jews who wish to come to Miami. Added to that is the post-September 11th attitude of the Immigration & Naturalization Service in dealing with people who seek to change their legal status here. Since most Argentine Jews (unlike Jews from other Latin countries) entered the United States as tourists, their ability to find work legally is restricted, and it is very difficult and costly to change their immigration status.

Our earliest policy discussions focused on our responsibility to individuals who were in danger of overstaying their visas or those who could not possibly change their status to be able to work legally in the United States. Our response to inquiries from Jews in Argentina regarding work or moving to Miami was to urge them to contact the Buenos Aires office of HIAS to understand the necessary steps they should take to enter this country with the ability to work. Unfortunately, most just came, and now many have tourist visas, which complicates our efforts in responding to their needs.

Professionals have a critical responsibility in gathering the data to determine and constantly review the needs in this fluid situation. At first, we thought that just providing general immigration and resource information would be sufficient. If neces-

sary we could provide minimal assistance through our regular programs. However, when the numbers of Argentine Jews increased, we confronted employment and legal status issues and needed to cover the cost of an immigration attorney. We still have not yet decided what level of financial assistance to provide a family waiting for a change in legal status. This uncertainty in turn hinders our ability to project what financial resources will be needed in the next year and to give direction for the case managers.

As professionals, we must also deal with our colleagues, who may not see the issues in the same way or with the same level of urgency. We have to help establish that degree of urgency. Some agencies have implemented new programs far more quickly than others, which has created expectations that other agencies cannot meet.

We have learned that providing employment, housing, or a day school education may inadvertently jeopardize the chances for attaining legal status here. Those who entered on a visa waiver cannot take steps that could be perceived as changing their status, such as enrolling their children in school. Doing so could adversely affect efforts to change their status in the future.

We also must protect our agencies from being construed as abetting people who are here illegally. In some cases, we can provide assistance through informal programs that synagogues or volunteers undertake, but we have to tread carefully. Regular synagogue Friday night dinners have become an indirect way to provide these families with assistance that we cannot provide through regular agency programs.

It is important that we help volunteers and other professionals understand that helping Argentine Jews in Miami is a communal issue that requires coordination and the exploration of different types of cooperative relationships. For example, we have begun connecting synagogues with Jewish Community Services, our primary

social service agency, to help identify potential employment opportunities and to circulate profiles of people in legal status who need jobs. This could eventually become a model for dealing with future employment challenges.

Our community response has benefited from the large presence of Jews from Latin America who have been long-time residents of Miami. Their understanding of the situa-

tion in Latin America and the commitment they bring to address this challenge are enormous. We have also benefited from the relationship that several senior communal professionals have with such agencies as HIAS, JDC, and the Jewish Agency. In addition to the expertise and advice they bring, these relationships help Miami view this challenge as part of a global effort, rather than a unique burden for us.