

## **Soviet Jewish Resettlement in the Small Community— Working with Volunteers**

**Marvin Bienstock**

*Executive Director, Jewish Community Center and Federation of Charlotte, North Carolina*

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Charlotte, North Carolina, has a Jewish population of 3000. In the past seven years, 14 Russian families have been resettled by the Jews of Charlotte. Of these 14 families, seven no longer reside in the community. Six established themselves in jobs and earned sufficient funds to move to other communities where they joined relatives or friends. One could not find work in the husband's specialized field and this family was assisted to relocate to the West Coast. Of the seven families still in Charlotte all are comfortably employed. Three own their own homes including one family which owns 3 other houses and derives rental income. Among the seven families there are two sets of first degree relatives. In each case the grown children accepted reunions with their parents resulting in 3 generation families—grandparent, parent, grandchildren. The last family to arrive came in Mid-May. Both father and mother already have passed their driving tests and are on their way to employment.

Nothing unusual about this kind of information, is there? The pattern has become common in cities of Charlotte's size and is a microcosm of what occurs in larger communities. Except—in Charlotte, the entire Russian resettlement program is done by volunteers. As a matter of fact, when I came to Charlotte four years ago as the first director of a newly created Jewish Community Center and as the first Federation professional, volunteers had already resettled six of the families without even the benefit of consultation with a professional. The entire program was a service project of B'nai B'rith men and women.

We could argue the propriety and even the professional ethics and standards of HIAS in

working with such an all-volunteer program. Our arguments would be even more pointed were it to be disclosed that five of these original families were from Odessa. But all our arguments would fall in the face of the critical fact that this volunteer effort *worked* and *continues to work*, despite the typical full range of upsets, protests, departures to Little Odessa in New York, and so on.

Before going to Charlotte I had been the director of the Roger's Park Jewish Community Center in Chicago and had been intimately involved in the resettlement efforts of Chicago's JFCS and JVS. Based on my "extensive" experiences, I delivered a paper at the meeting of small city executives just two months after my arrival in Charlotte. The paper's focus was on the importance of seeing resettlement candidly for the tremendous problems in it. Now some three and-a-half years and six families later I realize that there are profound and positive differences between large city and small city resettlement which need to be understood. Paramount in these differences is the potential of the volunteer.

Earl Yaillin of the Jewish Welfare Board once characterized the Russians as being like adolescents, because they want independence at once while continuing to be needy and dependent to an extent they barely recognize. The small city with its tendency to accept only one family at a time is particularly suited to coping with this ambivalence. Once the concept of volunteer is really understood by the Russian immigrant it helps greatly in establishing for him a separation between his image of government as protector, provider and controller and the non-obligatory, voluntary system of this country.

For the next crucial concept I am indebted to my wife, Gail Havens Bienstock, whose ideas are supported by four years of experience on the staff of JVS in Chicago, two years as worker at the Family and Children's Service of Charlotte, and her current private practice. She says that the first time she used a psychiatric consultant she handed over the \$60 fee and said with some anger, "My grandmother did as much for me and she did it free." The psychiatrist replied, "If there were more grandmothers I'd be out of business." "The point," says Gail, and I concur, "is that social work is the raising to a higher level of the process of one human being caring for and assisting another. It is the task which extended families and neighborhoods once did for their individual members. It is the task which current society, for many complex reasons, has given up and given over to the professional—except in small communities where mutual support and concern is still an operative lifestyle partially out of necessity, but more substantively out of the resultant comfort and security. This kernel of concerned care, whether professional or volunteer, is the seed from which competent social service grows. The only additional element unique to working with Russians is an understanding of the cultural differences which precipitate the major ills in resettlement and the finding of appropriate antidotes. These can be discerned by any bright professional or volunteer. The operative word is 'bright.' " (end of Gail's commentary).

Prior to my coming (and with little subsequent alteration by me) the volunteers of Charlotte had developed an approach to resettlement exactly the same as that which I had observed and learned from my colleagues in Chicago. It is not the purpose of this panel to detail that process but rather to examine how the volunteer is used to maximum advantage.

In Charlotte the core group of volunteers consists of one key woman with a backup crew of approximately 8 men and women including most of the already resettled Russians. The key woman, as "coordinator" has the responsi-

bility for deciding when to accept a family. Since my arrival in 1975, the Federation has assumed a more central role. From 1972 to the present, Federation has been the source of the finances but, with my coming, the "coordinator" and her assistants have turned to me as their ongoing consultant as well as for funding.

Housing, furniture and supplies, transportation arrangements, driving lessons, English classes, medical and dental care, schooling for the children are all arranged by the core volunteers with the cooperation of a much broader circle including doctors, employers, the principal of the Hebrew Academy and others, both Jewish and non-Jewish.

The "coordinator" carefully avoids the pitfalls of overpublicizing the new family and of having them subjected to an image-distorting array of dinner invitations at the homes of community leaders. Contacts are encouraged only by those willing to sustain these contacts. Each new family is unique in its own way and attracts its own kind of friends. Thus the number of involved volunteers expands with each new family.

Those resettled Russians who participate are invaluable as translators and as examples of what can be accomplished. Their success in jobs has led to their employers extending employment to the new families and placing the initial adaptation training in the hands of the Russian who is already part of the company.

Participation in the life of the Jewish community comes quite naturally. The same volunteers have synagogal, Center and organizational affiliations to which they bring and introduce the new immigrant who quickly becomes accepted, not fawned over. It is left clearly up to the newcomer to decide how much he/she wants to be a part of community life and the results do vary.

Carefully conducted discussions and almost daily contact initiated by the "coordinator" with the other volunteers' help to underline and overcome the cultural differences. The volunteers consciously reinforce key ideas such as the need to accept gainful employment even

at a level, if necessary, below that occupied in Russia with the understanding that freedom of job movement is an integral part of the social system.

How has the process worked? The average length of dependency on Federation financing before full employment and self-support is three months. The average total cost for a family of three is \$3400. And, of course, there are no staff costs of any kind.

There have been many problems as well as a specific positive which have affected the success of this approach. In the early years, a particular community leader assumed the central position and was responsible not only for accepting too many resettlements who arrived in too rapid succession, but he also was too dictatorial in approach, which caused other volunteers to drop off. When the Odessa families acquired enough capital to leave, this individual became disillusioned and withdrew, to the relief of all concerned. Incidentally, two of the Odessa families asked for assistance in returning to Charlotte and were told they would be welcome if they came as they left—on their own.

The specific positive element is the character of the present volunteer “coordinator” who has placed her complete time and energy at the disposal of the program and whose personality and willingness to learn have been the real key to success.

It would be understandable for some to say that this is not really a volunteer system but rather a quasi-professional agency whose workers continue for an extended period without pay. There are many points to make in disputing that position but perhaps the most conclusive evidence of the effectiveness of this *volunteer* approach occurred recently.

One of the resettled families accepted a first degree-reunion with the husband’s parents and his grandmother. (That made for a four-generation family until grandma moved to join her doctor-son in New York). However, the family lived some 60 miles from Charlotte in the small community of Hickory, North Carolina (population of 30 families scattered in and around this tiny city). The son was

asked if he would accept assistance from the Hickory Jews. He agreed readily and the Charlotte volunteers went to work. They found Charlotteans who knew Hickory Jews, preliminary calls were made, a meeting was arranged in which our “coordinator” and the president of the Charlotte Jewish Federation (I could not be present) spoke with members of most of the thirty families. The son was also present at the meeting and the full range of duties and responsibilities was outlined and accepted by him as well as by the thirty families. This in the face of the knowledge that the newcomers were scheduled to arrive within the week. Within two days, an apartment had been found and completely furnished, medical appointments and potential job appointments had been scheduled, a low-key welcome of the kind developed in Charlotte was scheduled and English classes for the foreign-born were unearthed at a local Church—all at no cost. Every aspect of the resettlement proceeded well with one exception. At the end of two months it was determined that work in the father’s field was available only in Charlotte and the two parents were resettled in Charlotte where both immediately went to work and became self-supporting. The feelings of the Hickory community over the departure were handled with groundwork laid for their future possible involvement.

It has taken Charlotte these seven years to work out the kinks in this volunteer program. At this point there is some discussion about expansion of the program and acceptance of more families. Two possible approaches are being considered. The first would involve the formation of additional volunteer clusters, each centered around a key volunteer with the present “coordinator’s” role appropriately expanded. The second involves training and using volunteer groups from the general community, specifically from closely knit neighborhoods with either structured neighborhood associations or PTAs.

The Russian resettlement volunteers of Charlotte and the Charlotte Jewish Federation are ready and willing to share any and all information with interested communities for

the benefit of professionals, volunteers and, most of all, the Russian immigrants.

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