

# AJCOP AND THE ROLE OF THE JEWISH COMMUNAL PROFESSIONAL

MAX L. KLEINMAN

*President-Elect, AJCOP and Executive Vice-President, United Jewish Federation of Metrowest, Whippany, New Jersey*

*The Association of Jewish Community Organization Personnel enhances the professional status of federation and other community organization professionals by disseminating information about job opportunities, advocating for advancement for women professionals, developing a Code of Ethics, providing counseling for those having difficulties in their workplace, and urging the improvement of benefits. Today, when Jewish continuity is an important part of federations' missions, a partnership among CJF, local federations, and AJCOP and the JCSA should be created to develop a common set of practice standards and continuing education curricula to enable professionals to best fulfill their responsibilities.*

As we celebrate the centennial of the federation movement this year, we are rapidly approaching another important milestone, the centennial of the establishment in 1899 of the National Conference of Jewish Charities in the United States. This represented the first national forum to discuss the problems of charities and provide "uniformity of action and cooperation in all matters pertaining to the relief and betterment of the Jewish poor in the United States (Penn, 1980).

In its first three decades, the Conference was spearheaded by the laity. By the 1930s, the leadership, composition, and tenor of the Conference were changed to reflect the professionalization of the field of Jewish communal service. This important shift empowered professionals with the responsibility for advancing the goals and aspirations of their colleagues toward the betterment of the overall Jewish community (Ephraim, 1966).

With the increasing segmentation of Jewish communal service into different specialties, Ben Mandelkorn, executive director of the Columbus Jewish Federation, in 1969 recognized the need for the establishment of a division of the National Conference for Jewish community organizers, who were, he maintained, "the best-skilled in the area of community organization [and] least skilled

when it comes to organizing for themselves." After Mandelkorn received a positive response from 28 community organization workers with whom he communicated, he called a first meeting of an ad hoc planning committee for the proposed Association of Jewish Community Professional Organization Workers. As a result of this initiative, on Friday, May 30, 1969, the first meeting of the newly named Association of Jewish Communal Organization Personnel (AJCOP) was convened in New York City at the 71st annual meeting of the National Conference (Rothe, 1988).

Mandelkorn well articulated the need for this organization. There had been a critical shortage of qualified personnel to meet vacancies in the field. In addition, the ever-increasing complex problems faced by communities of all sizes demanded more professional leadership with sophisticated skills, knowledge, and education. Although the Council of Jewish Federations (CJF) was committed to dealing with personnel issues within the federations, its first responsibility was to the communities and the lay leadership of federations, rather than its professionals. The preamble of the first constitution of AJCOP clearly stated that community organization work in the Jewish community was a "profession" that needed to be "developed, enhanced and strengthened"

and that it was to be the purpose of AJCOP to promote and secure the professional status of those engaged in Jewish community organization. By October 1969, 182 community organization professionals had become members of AJCOP (Rothe, 1988). Its current membership of over 600 includes professionals working within the federation field, national Jewish organizations, and allied Jewish organizations engaged in fund raising, community organization, and administration.

This article outlines some of the issues in which AJCOP has engaged over the years, some more successfully than others, and concludes with some observations regarding our responsibilities as professionals to ourselves, the field, and the Jewish community.

#### **ISSUES ADDRESSED BY AJCOP**

Throughout its history, AJCOP has always assumed a major responsibility for advocating on behalf of professionals regarding job opportunities. AJCOP leadership lobbied with CJF to ensure the publication of all job openings in federations for all professionals in the field. A later innovation was the establishment of the Job Bank, which disseminated job openings by national agencies among the membership and circulated profiles of AJCOP members seeking employment opportunities.

AJCOP early understood the importance of offering professional opportunities for women in the field. In 1970 a proposal developed by AJCOP's Personnel Committee concluded with the observation that "lastly, although males have been predominant in the field, we should consider women a good possibility." These good "possibilities" have come to represent more than half of communal organization professionals in the United States and Canada (Rothe, 1988).

Recognizing that there still existed gender inequities and professional advancement issues for women, an AJCOP Committee on Women was constituted in 1982. This committee played an important role in placing the issue of gender equity on the

communal agenda of CJF and the Conference of Jewish Communal Service (now the Jewish Communal Service Association). Although there is much work left to be done in this area, as reflected in the 1995 Forum on the status of women in the *Journal of Jewish Communal Service*, AJCOP's Committee on Women has had a lasting impact on furthering women's rights in the field. This is reflected not only in General Assembly resolutions on the issue of women communal professionals but also in recommendations developed by the 1987 Commission on Professional Personnel, chaired by past CJF President Morton Mandel.

At a time when we are confronted with daily headlines about abuses committed by professionals in the general field of social welfare and Jewish communal service, AJCOP in 1982 developed and approved a Code of Ethics that was circulated to executives and lay leadership of federations and national agencies. The Code referred to service within the Jewish community as a communal trust and called for the most noble and personal qualities of integrity, compassion, a belief in the dignity and worth of human beings, respect for individual differences, and commitment to service. Furthermore, the Jewish community organization professional was to be committed to Jewish values, humanitarian considerations, democratic ideals, and professional knowledge and skill. As a member of AJCOP, the professional must "strive to master a body of knowledge about Jewish values and history and must contribute to the improvement of knowledge upon which practice and social policy of the Jewish community are based" (Rothe, 1988).

To advance the professional development aspect of the Code, AJCOP pioneered regional conferences that brought recognized authorities to the communities in which the practitioners worked. The first such regional meeting was held in San Francisco in 1980, and dozens of regional meetings have been held since. In addition, AJCOP developed a series of educational programs at the national meetings of JCSA geared to

honing the professional skills of middle-level management. Bringing the body of knowledge to the membership remains, to this day, an important priority for AJCOP.

AJCOP has a long history of advocating for the improvement of benefits to members and has developed, in conjunction with the JCSA, a model Personnel Practices Code and Bill of Rights for retirees. AJCOP has always been concerned with professionals who have retired from the field and will soon be releasing a report highlighting volunteer and employment opportunities for retirees with federations and national agencies and stressing the need for young professionals to begin thinking seriously about retirement planning. In discussing and developing these initiatives, AJCOP has worked closely with CJF, as reflected by the participation of AJCOP members on the personnel and other committees of the CJF and the active involvement of CJF senior leadership in AJCOP affairs.

For professionals who are having difficulties in their places of employment, AJCOP in the mid-1980s developed the Chaver Program, which provides counseling opportunities with senior AJCOP members. The AJCOP Committee on Women has also developed a mentoring program through which senior women professionals provide counsel to younger associates in the field.

To preserve the history of the profession and the field for our youngest practitioners, AJCOP joined with CJF in commissioning an oral history project of some of the early leaders in the field, so that we can maintain our own "oral tradition" to study and respect. Most recently, AJCOP instituted national awards for senior community professionals, younger professionals, and retirees, which are presented annually at the General Assembly.

#### **OUR RESPONSIBILITIES AS PROFESSIONALS**

Although in its 25-year history AJCOP has touched, with varying degrees of success, on

some of the major issues confronting Jewish community organization professionals, there is much work to be done, particularly against the backdrop of many significant demographic changes that will necessitate aggressive leadership and engagement by professionals. In *Pirkei Avot*, the Ethics of our Fathers, we learn that if we do not do for ourselves, who will do it for us, and if we care only for ourselves, what are we? AJCOP is a major communal instrument through which professionals can advocate for themselves and for the profession, thereby helping build a stronger professional cadre and a more secure Jewish community.

I am troubled by the fact that membership levels at the Jewish Communal Service Association (JCSA) have seriously declined. When encouraging colleagues and individuals to join JCSA, we at AJCOP are confronted all too often with the question, "What's in it for me in terms of tangible benefits," rather than the realization of their responsibility to strengthen our profession and to upgrade the standards and benefits for our colleagues. Ironically, this response is similar to the "consumerist" reactions we receive when we solicit for the annual campaign, which we decry in unison as professionals. Even though we must seriously review requests for improvement of AJCOP and JCSA and then implement them, we must not lose sight of the larger issue. We must support our professional association and help it improve the level of service for its membership, rather than standing on the sidelines and criticizing from the outside.

In our changing environment where "raising" Jews becomes as much of a mission as raising dollars from Jews, how well equipped are our professionals in exerting leadership and serving as role models to help raise Jews? All too often we are ill prepared to take on this additional and necessary responsibility. Now is the time for us to discuss a common set of standards for practice and a commitment to ongoing continuing professional education to reach those standards. This is the time for us to

effect a partnership among CJF, federations, national agencies, and our professional associations to achieve this goal. But is there the political will to effect this lofty purpose? Are we becoming so "Balkanized" by our different affinity groups that we lose our effectiveness in generating one common voice for the profession?

I am concerned about the erosion of ethical standards, even as we improve salaries and benefits, particularly among executive leadership in our field. Is it appropriate for us to ask for *any* benefit, particularly if we think it may be granted, or should paying for synagogue and professional association dues be beyond the pale of propriety in negotiations, as these dues are the responsibility of any active Jewish citizen and professional? It is time for us to review these issues and subscribe to a common code of ethics that we should then share with our lay leadership (Linzer, 1986).

Lastly, because of the geographic mobility in our field we must solve the problem of portability of pension benefits. With the growth of defined contribution plans and commitment by CJF's Personnel Committee to help resolve this problem, working in concert with AJCOP and other professionals, I am confident that we will be able to offer system-wide portability in the near future. It is hoped this will resolve an issue that was first enunciated the year that AJCOP was founded.

## CONCLUSION

For the past century, the federation movement has been a glorious example of the partnership between lay and professional leadership. Professionals alone, however, have the existential responsibility to shepherd our future course together as practitioners in the field of Jewish community organization.

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