

# REDEEMING THE CAPTIVE

## Initiatives, Trends, Challenges, and Opportunities in the Delivery of Vocational Resettlement Services to Jewish Emigres from the Former Soviet Union

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*Emigres from the Former Soviet Union form the largest single group of Jewish immigrants to the United States during the past 50 years. While our goal of rescue may nearly be achieved, our commitment to redemption—to resettlement and to sustaining the lives of the emigres in our communities—must continue.*

Although the number of new emigre arrivals from the Former Soviet Union (FSU) has decreased markedly over the past several years, with a resultant reduction in funding, communities throughout our care system are faced with the challenge of providing ongoing and high-quality vocational resettlement services to a growing number of unemployed in the aftermath of the World Trade Center catastrophe and in the midst of a worsening economy. Our ability to provide the necessary human and financial resources to meet this unprecedented challenge will be a testament to our federated system of community agencies, dedicated staff, and committed lay leaders and volunteers.

This article begins with a snapshot of the MetroWest Jewish community and the Jewish Vocational Service of MetroWest (JVS MetroWest), followed by an overview of some of the key employment initiatives our agency has developed and an analysis of economic conditions and future trends. It concludes by describing the opportunity and challenge facing all of our service delivery systems.

### METROWEST: A SNAPSHOT

MetroWest is considered one of the “Big 10” Jewish federated communities. A sprawling, suburban area with no center city except the city of Newark, which is home to the

majority of newly arriving emigres, this four-county community in northern New Jersey has a population of 140,000 Jews, of whom 3,000 come from the FSU. The United Jewish Federation of MetroWest (UJF) supports several primary beneficiary agencies, including JVS, Jewish Family Service (JFS), the Jewish Community Centers, Jewish Education Association, and Daughters of Israel Geriatric Center. Each of these agencies has played a cooperative role in the acculturation and resettlement of Jews from the FSU.

JVS MetroWest is one of 29 Jewish vocational service agencies in the United States, Canada, and Israel delivering a similar array of services, though varying in size and scope. Our agency’s mission derives from Moses Maimonides: “The highest degree of charity is to take hold of persons who have been crushed, to find work for them, and thus put them on their feet so they will no longer be dependent on their fellows.” Founded in 1939, JVS MetroWest initially focused on resettling victims of Nazi-occupied Europe and fighting anti-Semitism in the workplace by engaging in job placement activities for Jewish residents. Today, it is a comprehensive vocational, educational, and skills training agency, serving persons with barriers to employment on a nonsectarian basis throughout the State of New Jersey. Last year our agency served nearly 5,400 individuals in its facilities with a paid staff of over 100.

Our current emigre resettlement program has a budget of \$760,000, with \$62,500 coming from UJF and the balance from government

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This paper is based on remarks prepared for the United Jewish Communities satellite broadcast “Immigrant and Refugee Acculturation: Challenges and Opportunities,” which aired October 18, 2001.

and private foundations. Services provided by a paid staff of 14 and some 60 volunteers include English as a Second Language (ESL), vocational counseling, job readiness and skills training, job placement, and follow-up. Last year our agency served 550 refugees, immigrants, asylees, and parolees, of whom 370 were Jews. From a high of 600 new arrivals to our community from the FSU in 1990, this year we anticipate only 25 new emigres.

#### **JVS METROWEST EMPLOYMENT AND TRAINING INITIATIVES**

While many communities do not have a JVS, the initiatives described below can be implemented directly through government or foundation support and/or indirectly through consortia or partnerships with similar community organizations. JVS MetroWest has developed beneficial relationships with many community organizations, including the Literacy Volunteers of America, local community colleges, retired teachers associations, AARP, Hadassah, ORT, B'nai Brith, the National Council of Jewish women, as well as the Young Leadership and other federation campaign divisions.

The goal of the JVS MetroWest resettlement program, which is shared by most JVS agencies, is to provide emigres with not just a job but the basis for a career. Our job placement rate has averaged 98 percent, with about 40 percent of our placements being made in the same career family as the job previously held by the emigre in the FSU. This statistic is particularly significant, since there is a clear preference among emigres for work in their professional field. In fact, this is usually what is meant by obtaining a good job in America.

While JVS agencies strive to secure employment for their clients as soon as possible, in order to achieve early self-sufficiency, we emphasize to our clients that "your first job is not your last." This is in contrast to the FSU where one's first job was usually one's last job, so JVS vocational counselors help emigres adjust to this needed change in mindset. We are successful in this endeavor because we are

able to offer continuing counseling support and several post-placement training and skill upgrade opportunities to our clients. Chief among these opportunities are English language and computer software training.

National data show that only 12 percent of FSU refugees who arrived between 1993 and 1998 had received any job training. Yet, such training has proven to be a key ingredient in enabling emigres not only to secure their first job more easily but also to advance more readily in their careers. In a recent New York study of emigre clients from professional backgrounds, which was conducted by FEGS and the Jewish Community House of Bensonhurst (Berkowitz, 2000), 75 percent of those surveyed reported English skills inadequate to advancing in work, social relations, or education, despite having taken ESL classes during their initial resettlement. Those who spoke better English earned on average 20 percent higher wages compared to those who spoke only beginning or fair English. National studies across varied emigre groups show a similar pattern.

Our agency's post-placement services fall into two main categories: specific skills training for the emigres and education for the employer. Skills training is provided not only in ESL but also in computer software and a wide variety of vocational career areas. This training is funded by government and private foundation tuition assistance programs, by targeted training assistance grants, and by the employer.

In our tuition assistance program, refugees receive up to 80 percent of the cost of a training program that lasts no longer than 12 months and leads directly to an upgrade either with their current employer or a new job. Through this program our agency has been able to assist refugees served by almost all of the 18 JFS agencies in New Jersey. Private foundation funding has enabled former doctors to enroll in the Kaplan Medical Review Program. Targeted training assistance has included an evening workplace ESL-Computer Literacy Program offered in six communities across the state for currently employed emigres seeking

skills and job upgrades. Employer-based training is customized to the specific company or industry and is typically offered on-site at company locations. Our experience indicates that, after undergoing training, emigres can increase their hourly wage by \$2 or more, whether through an upgrade or a new job.

Employer education also is provided, ranging from as-needed troubleshooting or one-on-one supervisor consultations to more formal classroom training sessions. A key component of the classroom training we provide is "cultural competency." Going beyond cultural diversity training, these customized workshops help supervisors and co-workers become more sensitive to cultural differences among their emigre colleagues by teaching them how to better relate and work together with persons different from themselves. This training may prove especially beneficial in helping combat the emigre backlash and xenophobia that developed in the wake of the events of September 11 and in recreating and sustaining a more harmonious and productive workplace.

#### **CURRENT ECONOMIC CONDITIONS AND EMERGING TRENDS**

##### **The Already Worsening Economy**

Several economic trends affect emigre employment. Although the current economic downturn began long before September 11, those tragic events served to intensify and propel the downward economic spiral. As the economy worsens, both as a result of the general economic downturn and as a result of industry-specific and associated ripple effects of the events of September 11, employment prospects for emigres will become disproportionately worse.

Current economic forecasts predict unemployment rates of 6 percent or higher by early 2002, with such industries as travel, hospitality, advertising, and financial services being negatively affected to even greater degrees. Key losses can also be anticipated in the service industry, which employs a disproportionate number of emigres. Not only have

layoffs occurred already in near-record numbers, along with reductions in hours for those fortunate enough to have a job, but prospects for new hires have significantly decreased as well. The emigre backlash and xenophobia referred to earlier, evident among employers and co-workers, have added stress and uncertainty to an already stressful and uncertain workplace for emigre employees. As the competition for increasingly scarce jobs intensifies, we can anticipate a marked increase in the number of emigres seeking job placement once again, career counseling, and skills training assistance.

##### **The Impact of Welfare Reform**

All of the above trends have developed in the wake of welfare reform, which over the past few years has shifted not only funding priorities but also has elevated public assistance recipients to preferred status hires for many companies. Under provisions of the Welfare Reform act, emigres on public assistance are being referred to agencies with little or no experience in working with a refugee population. With the assistance of the State Office of Refugee Resettlement, JVS MetroWest has been educating welfare officials as to why these refugees would be served better by agencies with particular expertise in refugee resettlement.

##### **Shifting Labor Markets**

Making matters even worse, many JVS agencies located in or near urban centers have seen a major shift in their labor markets over the years. For example, New Jersey, once a thriving manufacturing hub, where emigres with limited English could easily be placed in any number of companies, has seen many of its manufacturers relocating to the South or outside the United States. The evolution from a manufacturing to a service economy, in which available jobs require higher levels of English, has placed an added burden on emigres to master English-language skills and has made job placement efforts increasingly difficult.

### The Older Emigre Worker

As the population of previously resettled emigres ages and as newly arriving emigres continue to be older and less skilled, our focus needs to turn to planning and delivering specialized vocational services for this aging population. Our social service and government funding systems have not yet begun to plan sufficiently for the new array of services that the aging Baby Boomers will require, let alone the unique vocational needs of the aging emigre. As reported by Berkowitz (2000), older, more experienced emigres with higher levels of education worked significantly less in the United States than younger persons with less education and work experience. Older emigres tend to have less proficiency in English, have a harder time learning English and other new skills, and tend to be less flexible, making it much more difficult to place them in good-paying, satisfying, and career-oriented jobs.

Recent studies indicate that 70 to 80 percent of Americans plan to be working after the traditional age of retirement, some out of a desire to remain productive, but many out of financial necessity (AARP, 1999; Heldrich Center, 2000). In contrast, emigres from the FSU expect retirement to be at age 55. Many do not know about the Social Security System and its age requirements and expect to be able to receive "pensions" in the United States. As sociological and economic realities in the United States change, employers, funders, and emigres will have to change their mindsets as well and understand that the work life of the emigre will, out of desire or necessity, extend well beyond age 55—and even 65. These changes in mindset must then in turn, lead to changes in hiring and employment practices, social programs, and attitudes.

Educating employers about the availability and advantages of hiring older workers will continue to be a challenge. Our youth-oriented society clearly extends to the workplace, where recent college graduates are snapped up by eager employers and quickly promoted to managers, supervising workers two or three times their age. These new managers need, in

turn, supervisory training in relating to both native-born older workers and those from other countries and cultures.

Educating older emigres about and ensuring their access to Division on Aging and other community services will become increasingly critical, enabling the emigres to maintain employment by securing needed personal and family supports. We have found that mainstream agencies, such as Offices on Aging, may lack the sensitivity and knowledge needed to work with aging refugees, and we have initiated a program of education and training for such agency staff.

Creating or strengthening existing work activity day centers for those who cannot sustain unsubsidized employment would maintain socialization, forestall institutionalization, and enable emigres to experience the dignity of work while even earning a salary. JVS MetroWest created its Work Center on Aging in the mid-1970s in response to a growing number of disabled aging in the community who were in need of just such a program.

For those who will truly retire, creating and offering pre- and post-retirement counseling would assist older emigres in planning for their financial futures and with planning avocational pursuits and the productive use of leisure time.

### THE OPPORTUNITY AND THE CHALLENGE: A WORD ABOUT THE FUTURE

As the number of emigre arrivals from the FSU continues to decrease, there tends to be a corresponding decrease in funding from local federations and other Jewish philanthropies. A critical challenge facing many communities, therefore, is how to maintain the staffing needed to sustain even a minimum level of service delivery for those who continue to need services. Many JVS agencies serve emigres from around the world on a nonsectarian basis, which not only facilitates acculturation in the workplace but also draws in government and private funds in support of resettlement effort for Jews from the FSU. JVS MetroWest, for example, serves over 30 nationalities in its resettlement programs.

Related to the challenge of securing adequate funding, increasing community awareness is a key ingredient for the future success of emigre employment and resettlement efforts. The job of assisting and supporting emigres to secure, maintain, and upgrade employment and continue to be contributing members of the community may have only just begun. While our goal of rescue may nearly be achieved, our commitment to resettlement and to sustaining the lives of the emigres in our communities must continue. As Berkowitz concludes (2000, p. viii), "The alternatives are lives of underemployment and dependence on others, including the Jewish community, for ongoing financial and programmatic support merely to avoid poverty, and to cope with marginal livelihoods and incipient social problems. Creative efforts of Jewish philanthropies and social service agencies to maximize the language skills, earning potential, and employment levels of post-Soviet emigres are keys to assuring the growth of their contributions to their families, the Jewish community and the

U.S. economy."

How long will these efforts need to continue? My best reply to that question would be to paraphrase the words of that famous philosopher, Yogi Berra—"It ain't over till it's over."

May we all go from strength to strength in our individual and collective efforts toward achieving the timeless goals of rescue and redemption.

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