The Jewish Federation of Greater Washington

A Strategic Plan for Community Engagement
Approved by Federation's Board September 2005

From Disengagement to Joint Community Ownership
"…to build a purposeful and vibrant Jewish community…"

INTRODUCTION

The Commission on Jewish Engagement, established by Federation President, David Butler, in October 2004, was comprised of 12 people, expanding in January 2005 to 40, representing 50 organizations, chavurot and grassroots Jewish organizations in the Greater Washington area. The Commission's Professional Advisory Committee, drawn from area Jewish organizations, served as a resource. The work of these bodies culminated in a Community Summit on Engagement in April, attended by more than 150 Jewish leaders, representing some 60 synagogues, agencies, groups and organizations, representing a broad spectrum of Jewish life. They gathered to brainstorm new ways to promote Jewish engagement and increased involvement in Jewish life. This report chronicles the vision and strategic imperatives arising from the Commission's research and subsequent deliberations into the challenge and opportunity of increasing the connection and involvement of area Jews in the Jewish community. It opens the door to more detailed planning and the implementation of the recommended strategies.

FORGING A VISION FOR A PURPOSEFUL AND VIBRANT COMMUNITY – PART I

The Commission on Engagement believes that the Jewish Federation should remain the catalyst in building the community's capacity to implement the strategies outlined in this report. The Federation should also serve as the coordinating agency in addressing the findings and recommendations. Each individual organization must similarly be responsible for its behaviors and its evolution to ensure its own successful future and welcoming door for generations to come. The success of the Commission's plan rests in strengthening the skills and mind set of the community to "welcome", in bringing the communal vision to reality, and in securing the fiscal resources that will serve as the engine for building a vibrant and purposeful Jewish community.

INFORMING DATA AND BARRIERS TO INVOLVEMENT

<u>The Jewish Community Study (2004)</u>

The study data sounded a wake up call for individuals and the Greater Washington Jewish community, revealing:

- many aspects of Jewish identity such as ritual observance and individualized Jewish behaviors (i.e. seder attendance) remain unchanged over 20 years
- a significant majority of the population self-identified as "just Jewish", as opposed to traditional denominational affiliations

- non-Jewish oriented philanthropy and volunteer service are increasing
- area organizational memberships (JCCs, synagogues, etc) and communal activity is low and diminishing although levels of Jewish education are high
- some 41% of area households are intermarried, and 71% of them report little or no connection to the Jewish community
- a high percentage of 20-30 year olds tend not to connect with institutions

Themes discussed by the Commission and the Engagement Summit:

- despite many quality programs and opportunities for involvement, there remains a lack of information about Jewish community resources or how to access the information;
- the scarcity of resources to market programs effectively in the general press
- the high cost of Jewish memberships, tuition and affiliation, and the over emphasis on financial contributions as a precursor to participation
- resolving the tension between participation with and membership in organizations
- some members of our community pay dues, but are not "engaged" with the organization, perhaps due to the highly structured nature of Jewish organizational life
- interests in connecting Jewishly are different today than 20 years ago – more personal focus and less communal focus
- there are multiple opportunities and pressures for individuals to be involved in the general community or in one's neighborhood

The Jewish Outreach Institute's Scan (2005)

This study data generated a different wake up call for the community's institutions:

- many organizational gate keepers are barriers to involvement
- Jewish community institutions are not as welcoming as they could be to those not involved
- Few organizations offer outreach programming "where the people are" relying instead on attracting new participants into their buildings
- Barriers to participating in Jewish life include cost, policies regarding interfaith families, quality of marketing and geographic residence

Themes discussed by the Commission and the Engagement Summit:

- much communal activity revolves around raising money or the payment of fees
- unconnected members of the Jewish community believe that the Jewish community does not offer anything of relevance to them
- there must be greater sensitivity and awareness on the part of "gatekeepers" to truly embrace and welcome
- the doors of the Jewish community must be opened wider and include a more diverse constituency
- there are insufficient opportunities to explore involvement in Judaism and the Jewish community

Arnold Worldwide Market Research (2004-05)

Arnold World Wide conducted some 38 focus groups with donors and non-donors to the Federation in an effort to develop marketing strategies to better inform area Jews about the Federation and the resources of the Jewish community. Their research confirmed data from the demographic and JOI studies regarding affiliation and participation in the Jewish community. In particular, the changing nature of the Jewish community, the intense competition among Jewish organizations, the costs of being Jewish and the lack of information were each cited as difficulties or barriers to being involved. Findings led to the development of a community marketing plan, approved by the Federation Board in concept in April 2005.

KEY FINDINGS & IMPLICATIONS

The Commission's synthesis of the study data and subsequent discussions identified the following key findings which result in an overarching and integrated set of proposed initiatives and strategic directions. In addition, the Commission recommends that three populations receive priority attention - twenty/thirty somethings, families with preschool children; intermarried families.

Communal Findings

- both communal and individual marketing and program responses are required to stem low levels of engagement
- the established Jewish community must redefine its definitions of membership and belonging and develop alternatives to the high cost of participation and connection; need to measure success on participation, not solely membership
- devoting community resources to building a more welcoming Jewish community must be a high priority, followed closely by securing funding;
- the community must address today's consumer mind-set solely purchasing what they need rather than supporting organizations;
- the challenge of meeting basic operating needs and maintaining existing programs while simultaneously developing welcoming opportunities requires flexibility, energy and resources;
- need to combat institutional competition for members

Individual and Organization Findings

- life cycle events present opportunities for engagement with the Jewish community and with Judaism
- agency/synagogue/program "hand-offs" must be targeted and transparent
- there must be respect for the individual autonomy of Jewish organizations
- programs must be a locus for friendship, socializing and making a difference
- Jewish "life coaches" can be instrumental in guiding individuals towards a ongoing, participatory Jewish lifestyle
- children create a bridge for involving parents in Jewish practices and learning

- Jewish “families” or “clusters” play a critical role in shaping Jewish identity and involvement
- people need a personal touch – one on one; change will not come from institutions alone, but from personal relationships

Addressing these findings requires a substantial investment of fiscal and human resources in new programmatic initiatives that link people into the vibrancy of the Jewish community. Simultaneously, an intricate network needs to be created, one founded in information and referral and marketing, people trained to welcome, reach out and engage (the Hillel JCSC campus model) and the strengthened capacity of Jewish organizations to both serve greater numbers and reduce program fees. Organizations should be identified who are the most likely entry points for newcomers, and appropriate training and information need to be available so that those organizations can be truly welcoming. All these elements will combine to connect people to one another and foster a sense of belonging to the Jewish community. These connections create shared life moments, rich in Jewish experience, which in turn create Jewish community. Failure to act will further weaken the fabric of Jewish life and potentially close the doors of our communal tent to future Jewish generations.

RECOMMENDED INITIATIVES AND POTENTIAL STRATEGIES

Guided by its vision of welcoming and engaging greater numbers of Jews in the Greater Washington area, the Commission recommends the following initiatives to enhance communal engagement. While not exhaustive of all the ideas generated through its work, the recommendations strive to develop a sense of urgency, capitalize on communal pride and outreach sparked by the Maccabi games and Israel Fest, and seek to increase the number of entry points where someone can connect.

Initiative # 1: Build Community Capacity to Increase Involvement in Jewish Life

Potential Strategies

a. develop a permanent community engagement coordinator position
b. create a permanent Professional Advisory Committee to advance communication and collaboration
c. develop a shared vision and standards for contact around welcoming
d. educate and train all Jewish organizations in welcoming and lowering barriers including how to work with interfaith families, young couples
e. develop consistent community wide mechanisms for follow-up with people who express interest in becoming involved
f. provide seamless Jewish experiences through hands-on transition assistance from one program another (i.e. new parent workshops, preschool fairs, family education programs)
g. ensure a key component of current programs is to educate about "next steps"
h. designate "greeters" at every event, and follow up with attendees after

Initiative # 2: Develop New Programs Designed to Welcome and Engage Jews
priority focus on singles, young families, intermarrieds

Potential Strategies

a. create a formal welcoming program to Washington for all newcomers
b. develop programs that enhance the Jewish connection for those underserved (interfaith, twenty-somethings) using life cycle or holiday events as an entry point
c. take more programs to "public space" throughout the year, applying JOI model
d. create a broader Jewish presence and organized Jewish participation in community social causes/volunteering
e. create more "introduction to" classes with varying time commitments and substance
f. offer program options that connect spiritually, socially, educationally
g. sponsor community-wide Jewish or Israel festivals
h. create a cadre of "Jewish personal trainers" modeled after the Hillel JCSC fellows
i. implement an innovative grants program that focuses on non-traditional efforts of engagement
j. develop programs that emphasize intergenerational engagement or activity

Initiative # 3: Increase Access by lowering the cost of Jewish life and Jewish educational experiences

Potential Strategies

a. offer shared and reduced memberships between JCCs and synagogues
b. provide every teen/college student with a free trip to Israel
c. offer one free year of Jewish preschool and/or camp
d. offer free high holiday tickets
e. increase scholarship resources for Jewish learning activities
f. institute sensitive ways for people to learn about and access reduced fees
g. create endowments that will lower annual costs of education or membership
h. promote efforts related to easier/greater access in secular press

Initiative # 4: Strengthen Strategic Marketing and Communications

Potential Strategies

a. implement the communal marketing plan approved in concept by the Federation's Board of Directors which calls for promoting all Jewish organizations in the community and expanding the notion of one Jewish community
b. promote other Jewish opportunities through existing programs (e.g., preschool and camp fairs; seniors groups and volunteering; family education programs)
c. publicize broadly and consistently in the general press
d. link and leverage the resources of like minded organizations around programming and marketing
e. build on local organizations capacity to communicate with each other and externally
f. distribute to every Jew in Washington a "Taste of Judaism" coupon book, offering free "tastes" of programming
g. Increase distribution of resources – e.g. A to Z; Guide to Jewish Washington, JIRS website; JCC monthly newsletters, community calendar

MEASURING SUCCESS AND EVALUATION

While the following recommendations all seek to increase one's connections with the Jewish community, each requires greater thought and plan development, as well as determining its benchmarks for success. Some possibilities (again, not exhaustive) for measuring our success include: check-ins at events as to how people came to be there; tracking calls and participants at events; increased press coverage in the media; increased collaboration among agencies, synagogues and the increased sensitivity of gatekeepers, lay leadership and professionals.

FORGING THE VISION – PART II

Originality strengthens and enriches our individual and communal lives, through our actions, our programs and services. Originality is found in our Jewish community, at the grassroots level, in organizational life, and in individual expression. Tapping this formidable resource is at the heart of creating new connections to Jewish life. One of the most effective ways to ensure a vibrant and purposeful Jewish community is to foster a vibrant, enriched quality of Jewish life that leverages personal originality and beliefs and creates a shared purpose. Marshalling this originality, encouraging inclusion, open dialogue, diversity and greater connectivity with the Jewish community is the vision of the Presidential Commission on Jewish Engagement.

Issues pertaining to involvement and affiliation in the Jewish community often focus on reaching out to those not connected in the way we envision or practice. Assumptions regarding lack of interest or financial barriers frame responses. Increasing involvement can yield many outcomes: greater numbers of volunteers and leaders, increased financial resources, reinvigorating current programs or the communal environment. Most importantly, opening our communal tent forces us to respect and accept each person's Jewish choices and to ensure

that a range of opportunities exist that allow each individual to engage where comfortable. This acceptance opens the door to creating personal Jewish journeys that create and build community.

The urgency and need to respond now, is that our community is at the fork in the road. We can continue on our path as we have, or take dramatic, bold, innovative steps to transform Jewish life and Jewish community. We can be a community of shared values, a community that embraces individual originality and leverages it into a vibrant social fellowship called the Jewish people…a Jewish people that fulfills its responsibility to one another and to the global Jewish community. A community jointly owned and empowered, where no one is disengaged. The choice is ours. The decision is ours.

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