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Sent: Monday, March 28, 2022 2:08 PM

Subject: A Strategic Approach to the Ukraine Emergency



The following piece by Mark Wilf and Eric Fingerhut was published in Times of Israel today. [Click here](#).

A Strategic Approach to the Ukraine Emergency

Since the war in Ukraine broke out, we have been to the region three times, to the border twice, and to the command centers of our relief agencies in Jerusalem. Leaders of over thirty different major Jewish communities from across North America have been on these trips as well, seeing for themselves the humanitarian crisis and response. We have flown with Olim to Israel and talked to refugees in every possible setting. We have visited with Hillel and Chabad and the Polish Jewish community, and of course with the leadership of major agencies on the ground. We have lobbied in Washington DC for humanitarian relief and for refugee support in the United States.

This crisis has many dimensions and will evolve in ways that cannot be predicted. Even as we write this, news reports are suggesting a shift in the war that would affect relief efforts. Nevertheless, there are two things we can say for certain.

First, the consequences of this war will be felt for years to come.

Second, the organizations and philanthropy of the North American Jewish community are an essential component of the response. Significant sums have already been committed to this relief effort, and it is clear that much more will be needed. A couple of examples illustrate the point.

The Jewish Federations of North America, the system we are privileged to lead, has long been partners with two of the largest global relief agencies, JDC and the Jewish Agency for Israel. In 2021, we provided JDC with \$30M in unrestricted funding and additional funds for operations in the region that includes Ukraine. We are enormously proud of this investment, which helped JDC be prepared to act quickly and professionally when the war broke out. Since then, JDC has raised nearly \$50M in additional funds from all sources, including generous foundations and individual donors. Approximately \$10M of this total came from additional emergency allocations from Federations.

Our other core partner, the Jewish Agency for Israel, received \$69M in unrestricted funding from Jewish Federations in 2021, plus additional funds for operations in Eastern Europe. Again, we are proud that this funding enabled them to have in place the staff and infrastructure to immediately begin their vital work of bringing families out of Ukraine and to Israel. Since the war began, the Jewish Agency has raised \$32M, of which approximately \$10 million came from the Federation system.

The emergency allocations from Federations to JDC and the Jewish Agency represent about half of the over \$40 million in emergency funds that Federations have raised and committed in the past month. Federations have made emergency grants not only to JDC and the Jewish Agency but also to many other organizations doing vital, life-saving work on the ground, including Chabad, World ORT, Hillel, United Hatzalah, Hadassah, HIAS, Shma Yisrael, and the Israel Trauma Coalition.

Of course, we can't know how much will be needed by any of these critical organizations over the course of the coming months. In one set of documents we have seen, the Jewish Agency predicted the cost of housing refugees in the countries surrounding Ukraine at \$48 million over the next six months. This could turn out to be exactly right - or be off by magnitudes. Everyone is making their very best estimates.

It is therefore critical that we approach this challenge strategically. Our response is focused on four areas of need, three of which are already underway with the fourth being ready to deploy as soon as the situation allows.

Refugee Assistance/Humanitarian Relief and Resettlement

As anyone who has been to the Ukraine border and the nearby refugee centers can attest, this refugee crisis is largely one of mothers and children. Most are understandably reluctant to travel far away from their male family members in the hope that they will be reunited soon. The needs of mothers with children removed from their homes without warning are substantial, including housing, food, clothing, medical care, childcare, and education.

Of course, not all want to stay in the border countries, and many are ready to start new lives elsewhere, whether because they already have family ready to welcome them or they know there is nothing for them to go back to Ukraine.

Humanitarian relief for Jewish refugees is a vital responsibility of JDC, and facilitating aliyah is a core function of the Jewish Agency and the Government of Israel. However, Jews represent a very small percentage of the overall refugee population. JDC and JAFI do not turn away anyone who needs help, but our agencies alone can not do the entire job. Support for the broader refugee needs in and around Ukraine is essential.

Similarly, the Jewish community of North America has a historic opportunity to act on our deeply held values by advocating for welcoming policies for refugees in our own countries and by providing comprehensive support for refugee resettlement. We have experience doing so recently by working to support the resettlement of Afghan refugees, experience we can quickly build on to support Ukrainians as coming to our shores.

Aliyah and the acceptance of refugees by Israel

This new aliyah is yet another moment for us to reaffirm the role of Israel as the home for all Jews in need and to assist in building the vibrancy of our beloved Jewish state. We are quite experienced in such integration and know that it must be well planned, organized and funded.

Included in this category of needed support is the fulfillment of the commitment the Government of Israel has made to the reunification of family members of Ethiopian

olim. This issue has added urgency because of the threat of war in Ethiopia which makes it as dangerous for those waiting in Gandor as it is in Ukraine.

The Jews in Russia and Belarus

Not being discussed nearly as much—because we don't want to put them further at risk—is the danger to Jews in Russia and Belarus. However, with the economy of those countries collapsing and other social upheavals to come, we know that a major relief effort is right over the horizon.

Rebuilding Jewish life in Ukraine after the war

Given the significant investment the Jewish world made in building Jewish life in Ukraine over the last twenty years, as well the Ukrainian patriotism that has shown forth in this war, it is inevitable that there will be a call for the Jewish community to return to Ukraine when possible. The vibrant organizations that were making such wonderful strides will need our support to rebuild, as will the families who have lost loved ones and had homes and businesses destroyed.

In each of these areas, we will of course focus on **raising the significant financial resources** that will be needed. But there two other important roles we will play as well.

First, given the the uncertainty of the need, and the overwhelming generosity coming from so many corners of the Jewish community, **it is imperative that we have the best information and data possible** so that organizations and funders can make good decisions. The better our shared understanding of the needs and the impact of various organizations and efforts, the better our collaborations and coordination will be in meeting them.

Second, we have an enormous opportunity to **unleash the volunteer instincts of our community** in support of the refugees in North America and around the world. We have already helped the first group of Russian speaking Jewish professionals from North America travel to the war region to provide their support through a three-way partnership between us, JDC, and the Jewish Agency. We are working feverishly to build the systems and collaborations with service organizations that can enable as many who wish to volunteer as possible participate in this vast relief effort.

We are sharing regular updates on all of this work on Mondays and Thursday from 4:30–5:00 pm ET ([all are invited to join these conversations](#)), and are posting [regular updates here](#).

The Jewish communal response to the war in Ukraine is already strong, rooted in our Jewish values, and built on the foundation of our community's work year in and out. It is a situation that calls for us to marshal the power of the Jewish collective to make a transformational difference in individual lives and in the history of our time.

Let's do it.

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