



## SUMMIT ON VOLUNTEERISM A Response to Economic Crisis

### **Susan Kohn, United Jewish Appeal Federation of New York**

I'm the Executive Director of the Volunteer and Leadership Development Division here in New York at UJA Federation, which is a nonprofit, mission-driven organization that cares for those in need, rescues those in harm's way, and renews and strengthens Jewish life in New York and in Israel and in 55 countries around the world. I was asked whether we serve solely the Jewish community and the answer is we are absolutely open to Jewish people and to the community at large. If you were to go to our website, [www.UJAFedNY.org](http://www.UJAFedNY.org), there are 101 agencies which are currently in our network of social service agencies. They receive core operating, unrestricted dollars from our organization to do the good work that they do on the ground. In addition, we probably give out somewhere between 600 and 800 thematic grants, three to four years in length, to seed programs in the community in order to accomplish our mission.

I was not asked to speak about that today. I was asked to speak about the way that synagogues and congregations are tapping into volunteers in a way that's perhaps different than they had prior to the current economic crisis. So I'm going to try to meld the two topics together into one. I want to start by thanking Father Snyder from the second panel today, for putting in that one very brief and most important advertisement for the infrastructure and the professional support for volunteer coordinators. I think that all of our work becomes exponentially more difficult without the infrastructure and without some person or persons with a designated portfolio to support the work that so desperately needs to take place.

With that being said, there's another piece that I think we haven't talked about at all today, which is the board governance of our organizations. Those people who are not necessarily on the ground providing the meals or reading to the children or visiting the seniors, but who are providing the governance to our organizations are as important, if not more important, to our success. And while that may be a topic for the next summit, which I look forward to being a part of, I think it's a huge and important piece. During the economic crisis, one of the things that we find most important is to continue to support and develop the boards of agencies, to strengthen them to the best of their ability.

Agencies and not-for-profits and synagogues, and possibly churches and other faith-based institutions, are living in a time when boards are perhaps 30 or 40 years behind where they need to be. We must help those volunteers to become relevant and effective in the 21st Century, to be not just boards that look at ethical practice and transparent institutions, but also provide strategic long-term leadership and vision and in some cases, even generative leadership. They must ask the question of what it means to be a faith-based institution in a community, at a time when community is now virtual, as well as physical. So the more that we can look at our boards the more helpful they can become.

One of the ways that synagogues are raising the portfolio of volunteers in their community is by responding neighbor to neighbor and congregant to congregant. There's a grassroots effort on the part of people coming forward and saying, "How do I help? What can I do? What do I have to provide in my



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community that would be helpful to someone else? And how can I provide that in a way that will be meaningful and impactful?"

What's been helpful for us was a program in the community started 5 years ago called Partners in Caring, which co-located social workers from our social service institutions, into synagogues. There are about 400 synagogues in the New York community. There are about 140 institutions now that have social workers co-located in them. Those social workers are able to meet on the ground with clients who have needs, that wouldn't necessarily go to one of the more institutional facilities, and be provided the kind of support they need in the community. Those social workers are now being tapped and challenged to use volunteers to provide additional support above and beyond the social services that they provide.

So they are, in many of the synagogues, providing everything from social support groups, networking groups, positive supportive environments, weekly coffeehouses for those people who are suffering economic distress or have lost their jobs or are going through financial difficulties. They assist with mortgage issues, foreclosures, whatever it might be, and provide a place to go to feel human, to not sit home all day and stress, but to get out of bed and to come to a place where there are others that can support them. They're also providing mentorship opportunities. They have created job banks. Congregants are putting up the positions that they have available for congregants who have lost positions through technology and web-based support and not just the local bulletin board.

There was a seminar -- one of the synagogues recently, on using LinkedIn in order to do a professional search, and there was actually a volunteer who modeled LinkedIn on a PowerPoint for those congregants who -- like our food bank friend earlier didn't know what Twitter was, also hadn't joined in the LinkedIn yet, or Facebook or any of these other things that are also a little confusing to me as well.

People that are in the congregations who are job developers or HR Directors are lending their support, they're providing career counseling and offering resume reviews. They're lending their time for mock interviews. Rabbis are using their discretionary funds to help tide over people on their mortgages until they can secure additional funding. They're connecting, they're creating community resource books to help people understand what's available to them from the social service network, both part of UJA Federation and through the city and state and federal opportunities. I think that those are all really important ways that the synagogue is bubbling up from the ground up and providing support, that the social workers to their best of their ability are able to connect with that support, and that the Rabbis are being a part of this process as well.

Another thing that UJA Federation has done, as part of the Partners in Care program and our professional development and education division, is created training for the social workers and the Rabbis in the synagogues to be able to respond to the economic crisis. Because the Rabbis and the social worker, no -- even the social workers and the Executive Directors if they have them in the community, are well versed at the spiritual needs of the community, they're not sure how to handle the kind of emotional crises that people are facing right now. So there is ongoing training and support. There was a full-day conference in place as well to try to raise the profile of that.



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We will be hopefully launching in a couple of weeks an extension of that Partners in Care program called Connect to Care, which will take the idea of those co-located social workers and service providers and expand it to be more of an outplacement service as well. And it will provide both volunteer and professional services in the arena of career development, legal services, financial services, and so on. So it's another extension. We'll tap into the volunteer community in each congregation, as well as the professionals that are co-located onsite.

There's something that was launched a couple of years ago called Jewish Social Action Month. I know this is going to shock you all, there is one month of the year that does not have any official Jewish holidays in it. It comes after all those big holidays where all your Jewish friends get all those days off that you don't, September, October, we get a lot of time off. And there's the month which has nothing. So we decided that wasn't good enough and we created something called Jewish Social Action Month, an international effort which is one of the ways that we are encouraging volunteerism on the ground.

In addition to encouraging every synagogue and every Jewish institution to launch something that month, we also were able to provide \$60,000/\$70,000 in funding to a variety of institutions, many of them synagogues, who don't normally have access to funding prior. And many of them used it this year as a way to respond to the economic crisis, whether it was traveling to some of the communities that were hit by floods or that continue to be hit by the storm several years ago, or whether it's providing food and pantry support where there's food insufficiency in the community, starting those kinds of programs as well. So we've seen greening become an issue, poverty and food insufficiency become an issue, and response to chronic emergency care at this point become an issue for the synagogues and their youth through this program as well. I think that there are 24 other things I could say and I'm not going to. So I thank you for staying, for listening, and for being a part of the community.