

The Origin and Impact of the “Orthodox In-Service”

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By Joseph Lenti

Twenty years ago, the Orthodox Jewish community in Chicago’s West Rogers Park neighborhood was growing significantly, but Orthodox individuals and families made up a relatively small proportion of the client population at the local Devon Office of Jewish Family and Community Service. Social worker Carole Spreitzer, then director of the JFCS office on Devon Avenue (in the heart of the Orthodox community), suspected that the local Jewish community might be unaware of the availability of services for its individuals and families. She shared this hypothesis with Michael Kane of the adolescent outreach program Response Center, and with Hadassah Goodman, an Orthodox colleague at JFCS. Their subsequent conversations led to exploratory meetings with local rabbis and day school principals.

With the support of JFCS executive director Martin Langer, Spreitzer and Goodman invited colleagues from local agencies and the Jewish Federation of Metropolitan Chicago to a meeting to discuss ways to reach out to the Orthodox community. Many accepted the invitation, including representatives of JFCS and Jewish Children’s Bureau (the two agencies merged to form what today is known as Jewish Child & Family Services, or JCFS), Jewish Vocational Service, SHALVA, Council for Jewish Elderly (now CJE SeniorLife), The Ark, Response Center, the local Bernard Horwich JCC, and Associated Talmud Torahs

(representing Orthodox Jewish schools). At the meeting, the decision was made to meet regularly as a group of agency professionals serving clients in the Orthodox community. The group was initially known as Federation Inter-Agency Professionals Serving the Orthodox Community. Today the group is known simply as the Orthodox Network.

Within the group, professionals could get to know one another and develop trusting relationships. They could seek to identify the barriers which prevented Orthodox individuals, families, and communities from engaging Federation agency services, and to suggest and develop strategies to remove those barriers. In addition, they would share resources and improve the effectiveness of interagency partnerships and referrals.

The group's signature initiative grew out of a proposal by Rabbi Leonard Matanky, congregational rabbi and educator, to introduce agency staff to Orthodox schools and institutions. The proposal was embraced and JFCS provided a small budget for an all-day in-service.

The planners of the in-service hoped to make a positive impact on the Orthodox community and on the participating agency professionals. Orthodox institutions would come to recognize that area Jewish agencies were making efforts to engage and promote greater understanding, engagement with, and support of Orthodox families in the local community. Orthodox individuals would grow to see the agencies as safe places to seek needed services from culturally-sensitive professionals. Through learning about the culture of the Orthodox community, agency professionals would make fewer erroneous assumptions about Orthodox clients and would listen to and engage them more sensitively and effectively.

The first Orthodox in-service day took place on April 29, 1996. Fifty professionals from Federation-affiliated agencies participated in the all-day immersion program. The program included bus and walking tours of neighborhoods, organizations, synagogues, homes, and businesses in the Orthodox community. Participants visited several day schools, a kosher restaurant, stores that cater to the Orthodox community, and a *mikveh*. In preparation, the planning committee had approached each prospective tour stop to explain the in-service goals and objectives and seek their agreement to host. On the day of the tour, participants were welcomed at each venue. Site directors spoke to the visitors, describing each site's role and function in the community, introducing and/or clarifying unfamiliar terminology, and answering questions. Hosts reported their enthusiasm to be able to explain their mission and purpose.

The in-service also included didactic elements. Rabbis provided an overview of the faith commitments and daily rhythms established by the Torah and Jewish law, and an Orthodox woman described the challenges and joys of Orthodox life. Participants learned about keeping kosher, *Shabbat*, Torah study and day school education, the importance of *mikveh*, and community involvement. Throughout the day, participants had the opportunity to ask questions and actively engage in learning.

The great success of the first all-day in-service established a model for a continuing series of impactful biennial trainings. Over the years, new agency professionals and administrative staff have had regular opportunities to learn about Orthodox life. For their part, Orthodox individuals and communal leaders have developed a stronger sense of trust and comfort in seeking services from the participating agencies.

Since its inception, the Orthodox In-Service has brought together professionals from diverse agencies and religious backgrounds both among the program's participants, and in the group planning the program. The In-Service is an evolving program, a theme with variations. For example, the In-Service has recently emphasized a clearer understanding that there are diverse Orthodox Jewish communities (plural) in the Chicago area. The positive reputation of the In-Service has led to the recent development of related community education initiatives. The central office of a home improvement company slated to open a new, large franchise store in Skokie, Illinois heard about the Orthodox In-Service and requested a training to increase its staff's cultural competence, in order to better engage and serve Orthodox Jewish customers. A full-service grocery chain seeking to open a store with a large variety of kosher offerings requested Orthodox customer service training for its managers, coordinated through the Orthodox Network. The Orthodox Network has also recently initiated a series of "awareness and education forums" to focus on specific areas of concern (addictions, technology, etc.) when serving Orthodox Jewish clients.

Adam Weg, a social work clinician at the JCFS Peterson office, participated in the fourteenth Orthodox In-Service in May 2014. He reflected that the experience "helped me to increase my fluency and competence with matters of importance in the Orthodox Jewish world. Visiting the Orthodox Day Schools, for instance, made more tangible a milieu that I experience second-hand all the time in clinical work with my clients. I was particularly struck by the enthusiasm and passion of the educators that I observed. I also appreciated the tour's interest in exposing participants to diversity and difference within the Orthodox communities."

What began as informal conversations about ways to better engage and serve Orthodox individuals has grown into trainings and collaborations that inform professionals, improve cultural competence, and strengthen the links between social service professionals and the Orthodox Jewish communities of metropolitan Chicago.

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