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'Angel' in A Black Hat
Director of Coney Island JCC among those honored by borough president for exemplary public service.
 Adam Dickter - Staff Writer

On an average day, the Jewish Community Council of Greater Coney Island does out about 1,000 meals to frail elderly clients at four senior centers. The agency provides some 75 seniors with transportation services to medical appointments or shopping. Another 45 seniors receive home-care assistance with laundry and housekeeping, while 25 others receive friendly visiting or telephone reassurance services.



Some 500 area recipients of public assistance are assigned through the agency to work at nonprofit organizations throughout the city, while 200 dislocated workers or refugees receive vocational training or job placement services.

At the JCC's offices, staff are ready to provide technical assistance to enhance the management capacity to nonprofit organizations throughout the city.

A short ride away at the Shorefront Jewish Community Council, which serves the Brighton and Manhattan Beach areas, 75 to 100 seniors and refugees visit the offices daily for counseling and advocacy and emergency assistance. Some 900 individuals per month receive help from the JCC's food bank. Numerous individuals are assisted with job placement services. Homebound Holocaust survivors are provided with friendly visitations.

At the center of it all is Rabbi Moshe Wiener, a soft-spoken, modest man who makes both organizations hum. Rabbi Wiener has headed the Coney Island JCC since 1981, and was asked to take over the Shorefront Council in 1997.

In recent years he and his agencies have been recognized with numerous accolades, including The Eleanor Roosevelt Community Service Award bestowed by then-Gov. Mario Cuomo in 1987; the Outstanding Community Based Organization award by Mayor Rudolph Giuliani in 1996; and the Rabbi Shimon Zweig Memorial Award by the Metropolitan New York Coordinating Council on Jewish Poverty in 1993.

The latest citation: Rabbi Wiener was to be among a group of "Brooklyn Angels" honored by Borough President Howard Golden on Oct. 4 at Borough Hall.

The awards honor those who have made a significant contribution to improving life in Brooklyn, according to Golden's office.

"Too often we overlook the significant contributions made by numerous people that improve the quality of life for all Brooklynites," said Golden in a statement. "The Brooklyn Angels Awards were created to recognize those outstanding individuals who help make Brooklyn the best place in the world in which to live and work."

Nominations came from people across the borough who submitted more than 4,000 applications, which were mailed by the borough president's office to community leaders and organizations. The selection committee was comprised of a coalition of business,

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community and media leaders including Bobye List, executive director of the Kornfeld Foundation; Dr. Sadie Feddoes, columnist for the Amsterdam News; and Frank Maddalena, chief operating officer of Brooklyn Hospital.

Rabbi Wiener said he has no idea who nominated him. The award, he said, is more a reflection on the men and women of the two community councils than himself.

"I'm confident that the award is not a personal tribute to myself but to the Jewish Community Council and the efforts and dedication of its board of directors and staff," he said in an impromptu statement. "It represents the achievements of the organizations in improving the quality of life of the frail elderly, disadvantaged poor, refugees, educationally at-risk youth of the borough of Brooklyn, along with our efforts to enhance the management capacity of hundreds of nonprofit organizations citywide."

But William Rapfogel, executive director of the Met Council on Jewish Poverty, the umbrella organization that includes the two JCCs, said Rabbi Wiener was uniquely qualified for the award.

"Rabbi Wiener does incredible work on behalf of the poor and particularly the elderly of southern Brooklyn, both through the JCC of Greater Coney Island and the Shorefront Jewish Community Council," said Rapfogel.

"We reached out to him several years ago and he was gracious enough to take on the responsibility of the Shorefront JCC. We have a site director there, Chani Jacobowitz, but Rabbi Wiener is in charge. We work very closely with him in dealing with the immigrant and senior citizen population in the Shorefront and Coney Island areas."

The rabbi's "greatest strength is that he loves to help people," Rapfogel adds. "That's what he goes to work to do every single day."

The rabbi, a member of the Crown Heights Lubavitch community, is known to be at work as early as 8 a.m. and often stays until 10 p.m. A call to his home Sunday was referred to the office, where he was catching up on paperwork.

The work in Coney Island is considered particularly crucial because the vast majority of Jews remaining in the once-thriving community are elderly, many without family, who would fall through the cracks if not for the JCC. But the organization is nonsectarian, and many of its programs benefit more non-Jews than Jews.

"Our senior citizen services are an estimated 85 percent Jewish," said Rabbi Wiener. "But the vocational programs and Work Experience Programs are 95 percent non-Jewish. The vocational training program is about 40 percent minority."

The programs are also making an impact far beyond Coney Island or Brighton Beach.

"Over the years, the senior citizen programs have expanded to a much larger geographic area than the Coney Island and Brighton Beach communities," said Rabbi Wiener. "Other programs, vocational programs are boroughwide or citywide. The JCC, although it has a regional name, has a citywide reach." n

For information about the JCC of Coney Island's programs, call (718) 449-5000. For information about the Shorefront JCC, call (718) 743-0575. For information about the Brooklyn Angels program, call (718) 802-3838, or visit www.brooklyn-usa.org.