

Jewish Community Council of Greater Coney Island

A Community Based Organization with a Citywide Mission

by Fred Scaglione

The Jewish Community Council of Greater Coney Island was founded to serve a very specific group of people in need. Over more than a quarter century, the organization has pursued that original mission and gone on to do much, much more. "Despite our name, we are not serving only Jews and we are not serving only Coney Island," says Rabbi Moshe Wiener who revitalized JCCGCI in 1981 and has led it ever since. "We are a community based organization with a citywide scope of services."

Today, JCCGCI serves more than 1,500 people daily through a growing network of senior services, education programming, vocational and employment services, and youth programs. Through its NonProfit Help Desk Division, it also has become a citywide source of technical assistance for other nonprofits in the areas of financial management and information technology. While many of its programs are concentrated in Brooklyn, JCCGCI offers services and has programmatic sites in all five boroughs.

During the 1970s and '80s, the once vibrant Jewish community in Coney Island -- estimated to have been as large as 100,000 or more -- was in serious decline. The neighborhood had undergone a massive transformation, as huge public housing projects brought in a new, poorer, minority population. Jewish families were either displaced or chose to leave.

Synagogues, yeshivas and other Jewish institutions closed. Those who remained were often seniors -- frail, isolated and poor themselves.

By 1981, even JCCGCI, first founded almost a decade earlier, had fallen on hard times. Its assets, staff and remaining programs had been merged into the Shorefront Jewish Community Council in Brighton Beach. "When I came, all that remained were a set of incorporation papers," says Wiener who was brought on to manage a new program funded by the Community Development Agency, now part of the City's Department of Youth and Community Development (DYCD).

"Because the area had one of the highest concentration of seniors in the City and because seniors in Coney Island were particularly at risk, a proposal had been submitted to provide home care and transportation to the frail elderly who were not Medicaid eligible," says Wiener, who began by sharing a desk at the Shorefront JCC in Brighton Beach and soon moved to a small office at the Y in Coney Island. "It was a closet, really."

From this small base -- the initial contract was in the \$100,000 range, says Wiener -- JCCGCI began to grow. The local Interagency Council on Aging recommended an \$11,500 enhancement for its transportation services. This would create a new contract with the Department for the Aging (DFTA). "I clearly remember the DFTA program officer asking me whether we really wanted to do this," says Wiener. "We would have to main-



Rabbi Moshe Wiener

tain a whole separate set of books and I had no money for a bookkeeper."

Wiener ramped up JCCGCI's transportation program by revising its service model. Originally designed to use vans and drivers from a neighboring nonprofit, Wiener chose to subcontract with local car service companies. "When you use your own vans -- even if you have three, four or five vans -- there is a limit to how many trips you can provide at any one time," he explains. "Car services typically have 30, 40 or 50 cars available to them. Each car can take a senior to their own destination." The service is more flexible and less expensive.

Over the next few years, JCCGCI's transportation program was seen as so successful that DFTA began to expand its contracts. "Within a few years we had been designated to be the primary provider of senior citizen transportation not just in Community District 13 but in CD 10 which is Bay Ridge, CD 11 which is Bensonhurst, CD 12 which is Borough Park, CD 14 which is Flatbush and CD 15 which is Sheepshead Bay," says Wiener. "The program expanded very significantly."

"We take them to medical appointments. We take them shopping. We take them to senior

JEWISH COMMUNITY COUNCIL
OF
GREATER CONEY ISLAND

3001 West 37th Street
Brooklyn, New York 11224-1479
718-449-5000 ext. 220
www.jccgci.org

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centers," says Abigail Adler, Coordinator of Senior Citizen Transportation. "We provide annually approximately 50,000 trips to 5,000 clients."

"To put it in perspective, over 7% of the units of transportation generated by DFTA are provided by JCCGCI," says Wiener.

On the homecare side of JCCGCI's original CDA contract, the Rabbi was also looking for ways to expand its capacity to meet a rapidly growing need. "While millions are being spent on Medicaid home care, the majority of seniors are not Medicaid eligible," says Wiener. "They are living on limited fixed incomes. They can barely afford rent, food and medicine. If a senior has even a minor functional impairment, they need assistance in order to stay in their own homes and communities. It costs government \$70,000 or more each year for a nursing home. For a small fraction of that, you can provide home care and maintain a senior in their own home. The demand was overwhelming. We had literally hundreds of people requesting the service." Nevertheless, with just two home care aids serving 20 seniors each, JCCGCI was only able to offer support to just 40 seniors.

It was at this point that Wiener became aware of a new Work Experience Program being developed by the City for public assistance recipients. JCCGCI approached the Human Resources Administration (HRA) and became a job site. "We began training and assigning WEP workers as home aides," says Wiener. "While most WEP workers were cleaning the streets and parks, our program participants were providing critical services to isolated seniors. And, they were working in a field where they could find employment. Many of our WEP workers were ultimately hired by private home care companies."

This programmatic marriage allowed JCCGCI to significantly expand its home care programs. "Once we brought on the WEP workers we were able to serve 850 seniors," says Wiener.

It also created an entirely new area of service for JCCGCI – one that significantly broadened its mission both geographically and demographically. The organization's Vocational Support Services Division was born.

"We began training and placing our program participants with other nonprofits," says Wiener. "We assigned them to senior centers as substitute cooks, custodians, clerical workers, a whole range of positions." JCCGCI's HRA contract expanded to become citywide. "We

were providing services to approximately 1,000 participants and had relationships with several hundred nonprofits in all five boroughs," says Wiener.

JCCGCI also began some specialized work experience programs. "At that time, there were many Russian immigrants that were on PA. The City was not successful in finding placements for them because of language and cultural issues," says Wiener. "We set up a separate division to assist that population and we developed sites that needed Russian-speakers as staff or translators. Hospitals were very anxious to take our participants. It was a very successful program."

During the Giuliani administration, however, the City changed its policy with respect to work experience programs. "A decision was made to discontinue community-based work experience programs," says Wiener. "Able bodied PA recipients should better work for the Sanitation Department and clean the street rather than be assigned to more sophisticated nonprofit organizations." JCCGCI's pool of WEP workers – a program that frequently culminated in paid employment in real-life jobs – suddenly vanished.

Ultimately, however, JCCGCI's track record in finding meaningful work assignments for those on welfare would lead to its selection for another and ongoing program. New work mandates for PA recipients attending college required the development and management of supplementary work experience assignments which did not conflict with their studies.

"Originally called the CUNY Work Experience Program, we started off with on-site work assignments at four CUNY campuses," says Wiener. "In short order, the program expanded to all 17 CUNY campuses and then we were asked to develop programs with an additional 26 non-CUNY colleges and other schools." Today, it is known as CARE – the College and Related Experience program – and works with several thousand program participants each year.

"It is WEP like you have never known it before," says Elise Wunder who developed and runs the program for JCCGCI. "It is an internship or externship just like they are doing in school. Each semester,



JCCGCI provides English as a Second Language classes for clients in several of its programs.

their requirements change. HRA requires 35 hours per week of activity. If they are in school for 20 hours, they do a 15 hour work assignment. We meet with them personally, see what their goals are, assess their current skills and match them up with a nonprofit that is looking for that type of staff. We work with about 600 nonprofits throughout the entire city. In addition, we have our own staff presence at four colleges to allow them to do work experience on campus. It is a great program."

In 1995, JCCGCI built on its track record in work experience programming to win its first contract with the then-Department of Employment providing vocational training and job placement services for immigrants. Here, too, its background in working with Russian immigrants was valuable as it served the large number of refugees from the former Soviet Union being placed in Coney Island, Brighton Beach and throughout Southern Brooklyn. Over time, these contracts would also be expanded to include dislocated workers – those who have lost employment through no fault of their own.

Once again, however, JCCGCI's programs would be buffeted by the shifting winds of City policy. In 2006, the newly-created Department of Small Business Services (SBS) shifted funding to the new Workforce 1 Career Centers. JCCGCI's highly successful vocational training and job placement programs suddenly vanished. Luckily, and somewhat ironically, the agency's proven expertise won out in the end and JCCGCI continues to serve displaced workers – but through a subcontract with Workforce 1.

"We actually placed over 80% of the population we work with," says Rivkah Berman who directs The Employer Solution Vocational and Job Placement Services for JCCGCI. Berman's services also include an EDGE (Education for Gainful Employment) program with NYSOTDA

which provides classroom training in adult basic and secondary education, ESL and job skills training for TANF-eligible parents with minor children at sites in Williamsburg, Crown Heights and Flatbush, as well as Coney Island. A third OTDA/TAG program serves refugees and asylees and provides vocational training and job placement assistance.

Berman believes that access to skills training is essential to a successful employment program – particularly those serving dislocated workers and refugees. “We get bookkeepers who have great experience but may not know Quickbooks,” she explains. “If we teach them the latest program, they become very marketable.” The same applies for many fields, from clerical workers who need to know the latest Microsoft Office programs, to engineers from the former Soviet Union. “We teach them AutoCad,” says Berman. Unfortunately, she says, funding for training is increasingly limited in an environment which prizes “work first.”

Senior Centers

Over the years, JCCGCI's range of services have continued to expand on a number of fronts. In 1991, the Dinkins Administration decided to privatize a number of senior centers previously operated directly by HRA. JCCGCI applied for three – the Haber House, Marlboro, and Surf Solomon Senior Centers -- and was accepted. Subsequently, additional centers were transferred to JCCGCI's management.

“We now operate five centers and are serving 1,500 meals per day between breakfast and lunch,” says Wiener. “The populations in each of the centers is unique. Surf Solomon is 60% Russian and 40% American. Haber House is 95% Russian. The Marlboro Center is very Italian with a growing Black and Korean population. Ocean Parkway is 95% Sephardic and Jay Harama Center has Americans, Russians and a large Asian group.”

“Each center is unique, even if they all have the same goal of keeping people healthy and socially active,” says Grace Brandi, Supervising Director for all of the centers. “We try to develop activities that are of interest to the seniors in that particular center.”

“Our center is very multi-ethnic,” says Rosanne DeGennaro, Director of the Marlboro Senior Center at 86th Street and West 8th Street. “We have Italians, Hispanics, African Americans and Asians. They really get along very well. We try to bring everyone's customs into the center and everyone joins in.”

The NonProfit Help Desk

“Our mission is to help you do good, better,” says Chaya Abelsky, Director of the NonProfit Help Desk (NPHD), a division of Jewish Community Council of Greater Coney Island.

Created in 1992, the NonProfit Help Desk provides technical assistance for other nonprofits in the areas of information technology and fiscal management.

It offers workshops, trainings, consultation and full back-office support.

The Help Desk grew out of JCCGCI's own efforts to manage its expanding portfolio of client services. “We used to sit at a long table with thousands of index cards for each client, recording the services that had been provided,” says Rabbi Moshe Wiener, JCCGCI's Executive Director. Wiener determined to create a system which would capture client data and create reports in the myriad formats demanded by its many funding sources. Kayza Kleinman, a programmer, joined JCCGCI in 1987 to develop the system.

When Gladys Carrion (then-Community Development Agency Commissioner and now head of NYS's Office of Children and Family Services) saw the system in action, the NonProfit Help Desk suddenly was transformed into a technical assistance provider. “She asked if we would be willing to offer this to their other contract agencies,” says Wiener. A TA contract followed and quickly was expanded to be citywide in scope. Chaya Abelsky, also a programmer, soon joined NPHD to manage and expand its scope.

In 2006, the Help Desk began offering services in the area of fiscal management as well. “We were awarded a contract by DYCD to provide fiscal management technical assistance for their providers,” says Wiener.

To date, the Help Desk has worked with more than 750 different nonprofits.

“We help them build their capacity,” says Abelsky, who manages a staff of 15 who spend much of their time in the field providing on-site support and consultation for client organizations. “We have helped to rescue agencies which were on the verge of losing their contracts because of an inability to comply with reporting requirements. Our goal is to help you do it in a way that teaches you how to do it yourself.”

Last year, the Help Desk partnered with Brooklyn College to offer a certificate program in Nonprofit Fiscal Management. Forty nonprofit employees – bookkeepers, managers and executive directors of smaller agencies – from throughout the City participated in the five-day program. This year, new funding will allow creation of an accredited program at Brooklyn College.



“Most of the seniors live in the housing complex upstairs,” says Etty Friedman, Director of the Haber House Senior Center. “We are an extended living room for them. They go back and forth between the center and their apartments all day long. It is their home away from home.”

Haber House is also unique in that it is the only center in NYC which is open on Sundays. “Most of our seniors don't have any family,” says Friedman. “They depend on the meals we serve which weren't available on weekends.” JCCGCI raises private dollars to fund the Sunday program, which serves 350 seniors who come down for dinner. Another 150 meals are delivered to home bound elderly who can't get to the center.

As with many senior center opera-

tors, JCCGCI is exploring ways to attract a new generation of younger seniors while continuing to serve its current aging clients. “Under a capital grant from the Brooklyn Borough President and operating funds through the City Council's Healthy Aging Initiative, we received allocations to create exercise centers in each of our centers,” says Brandi. “We are trying to do things like setting up computer labs, teaching technology and letting them use the internet to correspond with relatives in foreign countries.”

“We now have allocation of \$250,000 to develop a mobile technology lab,” says Wiener. “This will be a computer lab on wheels that can go from senior centers and community centers throughout the City that don't have their own computer lab.”

In 2003, JCCGCI assumed operation of a Home-Delivered Meals program in the Flatbush/Sheepshead Bay area which has since expanded to approximately 350 kosher meals prepared and delivered daily. Private vehicles have been replaced with a fleet of temperature controlled delivery vehicles. In addition, Citymeals-on-Wheels enabled JCCGCI to initiate a volunteer based "friendly visiting" program for homebound meals-on-wheels recipients, which has now spread to several Brooklyn neighborhoods and also to Queens. This program compliments JCCGCI's well known (Claims Conference funded) "Connect2" home visitation program for survivors of the Holocaust (which serves Brooklyn and Manhattan and is also volunteer-based).

Education

JCCGCI is also working at the other end of the generational spectrum through a series of school-based education and youth development programs.

"Back in 1991, we began an Attendance Improvement Dropout Prevention (AIDP) program in a local public school," says Wiener. Over the years that effort has grown to be a network of after-school and youth development programs which has served a total of ten schools throughout southern Brooklyn and in Queens. "In the past five years, we have created 21st Century Community Learning Center programs with sites in Starrett City for the Russian population; in Queens for the Bukharian population; and in Flatbush for low income, Orthodox families."

Unlike many AIDP programs, JCCGCI's effort at P.S. 90 works with younger children and has been very successful in reducing attendance problems. "We start at the first grade," says Rosanne DeGennaro who directs this program in addition to her work with seniors. "We help them to not develop a problem. We service the children and their family. For the children we have homework help, tutoring and a dance program. For parents, we do workshops to get them involved in the school." To meet the needs of a growing Mexican population, JCCGCI offers parents access to ESL classes.

"A year and a half ago, we started Horizons Academy, a youth workforce development program at Abraham Lincoln High School here in Coney Island," says Wiener. The DYCD-funded program provides juniors and seniors with career-related services to insure that they will



JCCGCI serves approximately 1,500 meals per day through its network of five senior centers.

graduate and be prepared for college.

"We have 120 students enrolled and a capacity to grow to 200," says David Anderson who recently joined JCCGCI to direct the program. "We operate Monday through Thursday from 3:00 to 5:00. The idea is to reach these at-risk students and put them on a track for success." Each student has their own Success Coach – all of whom are school guidance counselors or clinical social workers – who help them to explore career options and develop their own plan for success. The program provides SAT preparation, computer lab, internships and job shadowing, explains Anderson who grew up in Coney Island and is himself a graduate of Abraham Lincoln.

Growth and Challenges

JCCGCI has expanded significantly over the last quarter century. So, too, have the challenges it faces. Its \$8 million budget has been stretched to cover more than 80 different and distinct contracts and grants, each with its own individual mission, mandates and reporting requirements. Despite a wide range of governmental grants and contracts, JCCGCI must raise private funds to support more than half the cost of its original core services – home care and transportation services for non-Medicaid eligible seniors. Much of this philanthropic support comes through foundations which have been drawn to various aspects of JCCGCI's programming – including its extensive efforts to

meet the needs of Holocaust survivors throughout the City.

Similarly, JCCGCI must continue to navigate major changes taking place in government policies regarding human service delivery. DYCD's Out of School Time (OST) initiative has already impacted the agency's after-school programming. SBS' approach to providing employment services has affected its dislocated worker programs. And, DFTA is in the process of re-designing the City's entire system for providing senior services.

In 2001, for example, JCCGCI began an initiative to develop its own vocational training facility. The idea was to capture those training funds being spent on outside,

for-profit providers and use them more effectively and efficiently at a training center of its own. "We worked with Hunter College Department of Urban Affairs to do a feasibility study which was so successful that it was ranked as one of the top three in the Tri-State area by the JP Morgan Community Development Competition," says Wiener. "We



Horizons Academy provides career-related services, including SAT preparation, computer lab, internships and job shadowing, for 120 at risk youth at Abraham Lincoln High School in Coney Island. JCCGCI's Educational Support Systems Division has served ten schools throughout southern Brooklyn and Queens.

now have over \$5 million sitting in the City budget for construction." Unfortunately, much of JCCGCI's government funding to actually provide training has dried up or been diverted to other service systems. "It is a challenge," says Wiener.

With its programs now serving people of all races and religions throughout New York City, there have been suggestions that JCCGCI think about changing its name. "It has been recommended for fundraising purposes, political purposes and identification purposes," says Wiener. "However, we feel an obligation to carry on the memory of a community that existed here for many years."