

# The National Affinity Group on Jewish Poverty FedLab 2020 Community Working Groups

On October 27, the National Affinity Group on Jewish Poverty FedLab track, “Building Community Action Plans to Address Poverty” convened 34 community working groups from across North America to develop strategies for ending Jewish poverty. **The National Affinity Group on Jewish Poverty is a collaborative of funders, Jewish Federations, direct service providers, researchers, media outlets, and advocates dedicated to fighting poverty in the American Jewish community. Founded in 2019, it is coordinated by Jewish Funders Network and the Harry and Jeanette Weinberg Foundation.**

The National Affinity Group on Jewish Poverty Federation-coordinated working groups consisting of stakeholders from cities large and small discussed local goals and benchmarks, examined their community’s strengths and weaknesses, explored “Success Factor” models and best practices, and brainstormed about potential partners and allies to include in their work moving forward. The working groups discussed ongoing Covid-19 response and relief while looking ahead to the next phase of needs and challenges in the work of poverty alleviation.

The following reflects some of the discussion points and takeaways in key areas.

## Common Themes/Observations on Covid-19 Response and the Path Forward

- Recognition that agencies and organizations have responded quickly to the pandemic, addressing myriad critical needs, growing programs, pivoting to virtual platforms, and rapidly implementing necessary shifts in areas such as food and meal delivery.
- The importance of fostering interconnectedness among Jewish community agencies and institutions, including collaboration/cooperation between Federations and agencies on intakes/referrals, provision of services etc.
- The importance of partnerships, but also of recognizing where partnerships are helpful and where they can create conflict.
- The critical role of lay leaders as ambassadors/spokespersons about this work.
- The critical role strong congregations and clergy can play in getting the word out about poverty-related services.
- The need for planful collaboration and for understanding the wider landscape of agencies addressing poverty.
- Focus on outcomes and data, as well as innovation

With an awareness of the need to plan long term, individual communities reported being at various stages in carrying out community studies and planning long term based on that data, with many noting the need to address the ways in which the pandemic might impact these studies.

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## Looking to the Future: Focus Areas

As agencies and organizations look to the long and challenging road ahead, FedLab highlighted a number of key focus areas: Data Gathering, Measurement and Evaluation; Awareness Building, Outreach and Advocacy; Partnership, Collaboration and Convening for Impact; and Landscape Analysis. Groups explored approaches to be considered and pandemic-related innovations that might take root and be implemented more permanently in these areas. Groups also reflected on the potential for broader implementation of the local success factors and benchmark programs highlighted in the FedLab workshop.

1. *Data Gathering, Measurement and Evaluation (The Jewish Federations of North America and Jewish Federation of Greater Philadelphia)*

JFNA presented on an effort it has launched with the Harry and Jeanette Weinberg Foundation to standardize and expand poverty measures in local Jewish community studies in order to help “improve our understanding of the scope and dimensions of poverty in the Jewish community.”

This presentation sparked conversation on how collecting, sharing and aggregating existing data can inform the conversation. Groups discussed the opportunities presented by the Weinberg Foundation-JFNA initiative and the need for updated data that accounts for the impact of the pandemic.

In a session on measurement and evaluation, the Jewish Federation of Greater Philadelphia presented on its Integrated Data Warehouse, designed to promote more efficient food distribution strategies. It shared challenges posed by issues around privacy and the Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act (HIPAA), and discussed how the Jewish Federation and its partners have been able to use its shared data system to assess and respond to needs.

In the community group discussions, the following key points surfaced:

- Groups considered how, in their own communities, a shared data system and work across partnerships to collect and share data regularly might allow agencies to be more effective.
- When considering knowledge-building and transfer, groups raised questions about best practices and service trends in the field, as well as what are the possibilities of shared infrastructure and how could this tie to knowledge dissemination?
- Groups talked about gathering better, more accessible data, and the importance of complying with legal and ethical standards, as well as ensuring agencies understand the benefits and value of data collection.

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- Groups discussed ways to define success. What standards — objective and subjective — should be used to measure poverty? What should be included in metrics: the numbers of meals served? satisfied clients? keeping people out of crises?
- Groups asked: How are we to address and measure when people fall back? How can we know better whether what we are doing is making a difference?
- What are meaningful next steps given our starting point?
- How do we collect data without duplications?
- Groups emphasized that consistency, along with respect for client privacy, must be considered in developing effective databases.
- Groups discussed further developing data strategy and competencies within their community and learning from communities that are more data-driven and data-literate and have greater sharing of data. Members of large communities remarked on the expense and challenges of scale in implementing a shared system.
- One group noted the importance of clarity around goals in informing how a system is built - including wide-scale impact measurement, client referrals, and reducing inefficiencies.
- Some discussed using an outside platform for data sharing and the need to employ a professional researcher.
- Groups considered how the data already collected by JFNA might be helpful to their community.
- Communities, on a range of timelines with their past and planned community studies, discussed the importance of a study that will include demographic information and needs assessment in order to plan for real impact, and the need to update existing data and revisit poverty-related questions in light of the pandemic.
- Groups discussed how data must be refined to be useful to staff and the importance of asking: Do we have the data to support our plans and discussions?

*Awareness Building, Outreach and Advocacy (UJA-Federation of New York and Jewish Family Service Los Angeles)*

UJA-Federation of New York highlighted its anti-poverty initiative, launched in 2017, to amplify its work in the poverty space by capitalizing on the resources and expertise of its network. UJA focused on the importance of messaging for success, using the aspirational name “Upward NY” as part of its comprehensive awareness-raising strategy to encourage people to be a part of the initiative.

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This session prompted discussion about raising awareness to ensure that people know where to turn to access resources and services. Groups reflected on the ways that naming with intentionality can help reframe the work to focus on uplifting individuals and building community, motivating people to learn more or reach out for services. The discussion of messaging prompted conversation on the ways that “poverty” can be a deeply stigmatizing word, asking: Is there better language for discussing this issue?

In the community group discussions, the following key points surfaced:

- The challenge of making sure the community knows about the resources that exist. Knowing there are people who are not being reached right now, where are they? and why aren't they coming to ask for help?
- How do we offer help while preserving dignity? Communities talked about the challenges of reaching people not being currently served, outreach in atypical spaces, growing outreach and lowering the barriers to entry.
- Overcoming the myth that there are no Jews in poverty. “How do we get past the “invisibility” barrier?” one participant asked.
- The ways in which the pandemic is creating new poverty but also making existing poverty more noticeable and bringing the issue front and center.
- The importance of pairing data and statistics with individual stories and issues.
- Avenues for educating and engaging the community around poverty alleviation. One group considered the idea of developing an anti-poverty day to teach day school or synagogue audiences about what is happening on the ground.
- Focusing on engaging stakeholders across the community, raising awareness across agencies as to what poverty may look like is important. They emphasized the need to gather, clarify and share information, and showcase the programming all of the agencies are doing, and discussed relationship building and keeping community leaders informed.
- Jewish Family Service Los Angeles described ways that community organizations might create an effective advocacy program. JFS-LA shared that when nonprofit agencies successfully partner with public officials (and their staff) to build mutually supportive relationships, the outcome is better service and greater benefits for the community they serve together. Groups discussed the internal capacity for productive advocacy and considered how advocacy might factor into their work going forward.

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## *Partnership, Collaboration and Convening for Impact (Combined Jewish Philanthropies Boston)*

Combined Jewish Philanthropies presented on its Anti-Poverty Initiative (API), a collective impact project aimed at alleviating financial distress for members of the Jewish community in Boston. The initiative relies heavily on coordination between six partner organizations who convene regularly and deliver interagency support for clients. CJP outlined the key components to successfully implementing the Collective Impact model (common agenda, shared measurement, mutually reinforcing activities, continuous communication, strong backbone).

This session inspired broad conversations about bringing more stakeholders and partners around the table. In the community group discussions, the following key points surfaced:

- Expanding organizational reach by including: Rabbinic groups; Hebrew Free Loan Associations; JCCs; local organizations addressing issues around poverty; congregations; and organizations that work with Jews who are unaffiliated. Some discussed work with foundations and lay leaders.
- Ideas were raised about connecting with nontraditional partners, developing an ecosystem of partnerships within systems, and reaching out beyond the Jewish community to amplify services.
- As they discussed greater collaboration, some groups discussed the importance of asking whether we have the right people at the table, and whether we having the right conversations.
- Are there too many silos in the community? Do we need to break down institutional barriers and if so, how?

## *Client-Centered Approaches (Jewish Family and Children's Service of Greater Philadelphia)*

Jewish Family and Children's Services of Greater Philadelphia described how its client-centered approach influenced its Holocaust Survivor Advisory Committee and soon-to-launch Peer Fellow program. This inspired conversations about bringing people with lived experiences into the conversation. In the community group discussions, the following key points surfaced:

- Who is speaking for the poor or near poor in the community?
- Where does the conversation of Jewish communal poverty fit within the context of broader communal poverty? "It is hard to deal with Jewish poverty in isolation.... because the issues that cause poverty are societal – not just Jewish. How can you address the issues for one group and not the whole community? It might be happening, but we haven't heard that yet today."

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## *Landscape Analysis (The Jewish Federation of Greater Los Angeles)*

The Jewish Federation of Greater Los Angeles highlighted the community's pandemic response and ways in which it mobilized immediately and pivoted its work to rapidly respond to ever-changing and growing pandemic-related needs. It shared how it leveraged existing community partnerships to meet their community's evolving needs, offering emergency cash grants, interest-free loans, food delivery, food assistance, and many other critical services.

This presentation prompted group discussion on meeting new and growing needs during the pandemic while also planning for the next phase of response. Groups looking ahead to the next phase of response, discussed:

- What are the critical things we need to do now and six months from now? How do we increase capacity for the intakes that may occur if we increase outreach efforts?
- What are big, audacious projects we might consider for the next 5-8 years?
- Some groups focused on root cause analysis and getting a handle on true needs, asking: Who are the poor in our community? What are their needs and life situations? What is our vision for programs and services, what tools are available to address need? And how do we find those who aren't able to help themselves or don't know that we are a resource?
- Benchmarking and innovation - how do we showcase the programming all of our agencies are doing? How might we develop nontraditional ways to approach problems.
- Preparing for a poverty wave that might be coming. Looking ahead, groups asked, could this just be the beginning of the pandemic impact and might we see that in the coming year(s) poverty in our community will only get worse?
- One community raised the need for more discussions around preventing poverty. Noting that people often don't seek help until they are deep in crisis, when it takes much longer to assist them, some asked, what can we do to address the people who are in "near poverty" before their situations reach crisis level?
- Overcoming stigma - how do we work with a cohort of people newly facing financial hardship?
- Preparing for the next phase of pandemic response, communities need to make good use of resources that are currently available and explore what further resources are needed.
- Some discussed scenario planning based on community studies.

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- Raising and allocating funds going forward - at what level should we be addressing our communal needs – is it money to the individuals, money to the agencies, or investing in the professionals and in “infrastructure” that will help serve the underlying needs?
- The need to grow and diversify funding sources and the importance of funds not only for innovation but also to grow programs, and to conduct landscape analysis.
- The need for better communication on a both local and national levels.

## Looking to the Future: Program Models

In addition to discussing the focus areas above, working groups also explored how several model programs might inform their local efforts:

### *Queens Hub (UJA - Federation of NY)*

The Queens Hub, a new one-stop social service center inspired discussion on agency interactivity and the need for greater collaboration and increased coordination and integration of services. Groups discussed:

- Initiatives to maximize opportunity and reduce entry barriers for those seeking services.
- The need to build a collaborative model of social services delivery with a “no wrong door” approach.
- The need for more communication and greater trust between agencies, asking: How do we maintain important structures but get beyond institutional barriers?

### *EZRA Network (Jewish Federation of Los Angeles)*

This network brings together The Jewish Federation of Los Angeles, Cedars-Sinai Hospital, Jewish Family Services, Bet Tzedek Legal Services, Jewish Free Loan, JVS SoCal, and over 25 synagogues, providing social workers on site at synagogues to refer new clients and to assist with some social service needs. This model sparked conversation on several points:

- Greater agency coordination and opportunities congregations and rabbis can provide for outreach. How can congregations be a point of connection in awareness building and service referral.
- Relationship-building specific to poverty alleviation, exploring more programming at synagogues to promote broader services available in the community.
- One group discussed how some rabbis may be more eager to connect, while others may already refer to other resources.

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- Bringing congregational representatives into the conversation, getting input and gaining understanding from congregations to help fill in gaps in knowledge, think about ways to address need, and extend the reach and awareness of services offered.

## *Coordinating Beyond Geographic Borders (Network of Jewish Human Service Agencies)*

The Network of Jewish Human Service Agencies presented on an initiative to bring agencies together for an integrated response to pandemic-related unemployment in the Jewish community, leveraging the ease of access that comes with virtual service delivery. Because a wider array of content could be made available online than in person, and because individuals could access them regardless of their location, agencies saw more community members using their virtual services. Communities discussed:

- The realities of maintaining virtual services after the pandemic and the ways communities will be expected to embrace the virtual world and prepare for hybrid systems in the coming months and years.
- The need to shift our language from temporary to permanent; embracing the tools and opportunities of the virtual world and ways that technology could extend reach and improve services, such as food distribution.
- Lending devices and providing assistance to help get people connected.
- Changes in tele-health, and how technology can help ensure that all organizations and individuals can see and access resources and services.
- How information and best practices might be shared across agencies.
- The need for technology training for any virtual initiative.
- Funding to ensure clients have devices and internet service.
- Ensuring provision of equal services across regions.

As the work of alleviating poverty continues and agencies and organizations make greater use of virtual platforms, communities are exploring new opportunities for coordination of services and greater organizational collaboration.

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## *Virtual Employment Assistance Services (JVS Boston and JVS Toronto)*

JVS Boston and JVS Toronto described how their agencies moved employment assistance services from in-person to virtual platforms. They discussed virtual offerings to support the recently unemployed, such as: career coaching sessions, resume development, mock interviews and job placement, and virtual job fairs.

Discussion centered on the importance of job and vocational services, which agencies expect will be pivotal in the coming year. Discussion touched upon the role of employment in poverty alleviation, awareness of growing job loss in the community, and the reality that employment assistance is expected to be a big issue in 2021.

In the community group discussions, the following key points surfaced:

- Planning for employment assistance by the start of the new year, addressing the need for more job training and virtual job fairs and service integration.
- Connecting with outside organizations around the issue, doing more with workforce development resources, addressing related challenges around healthcare and benefits, and integrating employment assistance with other agency services.
- Job insecurity among those just graduating college. One community referenced local programs serving young adults around these issues. Others referenced, the [Brandeis Covid-19 impact study](#) and how it might be used to uncover and address need.

Across the board, job loss and underemployment has become a critical issue during the pandemic with the need for employment assistance expected to continue to grow in the coming months. The shift to virtual service delivery has provided an opportunity to provide these services in ways that maximize resources, consolidate expertise, and are highly accessible with potential to reach across geographic boundaries.

## **Conclusion**

Bringing together expertise and insights from almost 40 Jewish communities throughout North America, the 2020 National Affinity Group on Jewish Poverty FedLab program sparked important conversations and planning about how best to respond to the myriad challenges exacerbated, and in some cases caused, by Covid-19, but it also provided best practices and tools for thinking even farther into the future. As members of one working group observed, “The underpinnings of a response to Jewish poverty are dignity, efficiency, hope and opportunity.”