The Vanishing Volunteer

Jewish organizations and institutions depend on volunteers. Social services, fundraising, cultural, social and religious activities all require substantial volunteer hours. Since the Reagan assault on human service programs, the need for volunteer help has become more critical. The Jewish community, like other American communities, includes substantial numbers of poor and disabled Jews and single-parent families. Populations with such basic needs are coupled with the particularistic agenda of American Jewish life: preserving Jewish identity, strengthening commitment to Jewish culture and values, and adding vibrancy to contemporary Jewish life. All of these require millions of volunteer hours.

But Jewish organizations and institutions are failing to attract enough volunteers. While the same people tend to volunteer repeatedly, most Jews do not volunteer at all. Recent studies from seven Jewish communities show some sobering patterns of volunteerism for contemporary Jewish organizations.

Major Findings

Major findings show that:

1. Most Jewish adults spend no time or less than one hour per month volunteering for any Jewish organizations.

2. With the exception of a few Jewish communities, Jews are even less likely to volunteer for non-Jewish organizations. Exceptions are Washington, DC, where Jews are more likely to volunteer for non-Jewish organizations, and Rochester, where time is allocated about equally between Jewish and non-Jewish organizations.

The Research

Demographic studies, sponsored by Jewish Federations between 1982 and 1987, collected data about the demographic, religious, and organizational characteristics of their respective Jewish populations.
3. Most Jews will do volunteer work at some time in their lives, but volunteerism seems to be strongly related to life-cycle events such as having school-age children. Jews under 30 and over 65 are far less likely to do volunteer work.

4. Synagogues and temples receive the largest proportion of Jewish volunteer time.

5. Orthodox and Conservative Jews are more likely to volunteer than Reform Jews and Jews who identify themselves as being "just Jewish."

6. Higher-income Jews are far more likely to vol-
unteer than lower-income Jews.

7. Women who are employed full-time are less likely to volunteer than those who are employed part-time or those who are full-time homemakers.

8. Volunteerism for Jewish organizations is very low among couples where one spouse is not Jewish.

9. Aside from demographic characteristics such as age and family formation, life style influences volunteerism. When asked why they do not volunteer, "too busy" is the most often listed response.

10. Most Jews, nevertheless, are at least somewhat receptive to volunteer tasks. "Nobody ever asked me to" is also a frequent explanation for non-volunteerism, and the studies show that most Jews could be volunteers.

The Data

In Washington, DC, St. Louis, and Atlantic City about four out of five adults spend less than one hour per month in volunteer time for Jewish organizations. In Rochester, almost two out of three spend little or no time doing volunteer work. In the rest of the cities studied, about three out of four adults spend little or no time volunteering.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>City</th>
<th>Percent of Adults Volunteering No Time or Less than One Hour per Month for Jewish Organizations</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Atlantic City</td>
<td>79%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Baltimore</td>
<td>75%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>New Orleans</td>
<td>84%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rochester</td>
<td>63%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>St. Louis</td>
<td>73%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Washington, DC</td>
<td>79%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Worcester</td>
<td>71%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

At the same time, a number of communities have a core of very dedicated volunteers; about 5% of the adult Jews in Atlantic City, Baltimore, and Rochester spend 20 hours or more each month volunteering for Jewish organizations. Baltimore and Rochester also have about 4-5% of the adults volunteering 20 hours or more per month for non-Jewish organizations.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>City</th>
<th>Percent of Adults Volunteering 30 Hours or More per Month for Jewish Organizations</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Atlantic City</td>
<td>4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Baltimore</td>
<td>4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>New Orleans</td>
<td>1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rochester</td>
<td>2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>St. Louis</td>
<td>2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Washington, DC</td>
<td>1.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Worcester</td>
<td>6%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Where Do We Go From Here?

Increasing attention must be paid to attracting and training volunteers from all sectors of the Jewish population. Women labor-force participants, inter-
marrried couples, and unaffiliated Jews now com-
prise increasing proportions of the total Jewish pop-
ulation. Members of these groups are less likely to volunteer their time than their counterparts: women who are not labor-force participants, in-
marrried couples, and affiliated Jews. The data also show that those who volunteer are more likely to be bigger contributors to Jewish organizations, sup-
porting the notion that philanthropic and volunteer efforts are mutually reinforcing.

Much more research is needed. What kinds of vol-
unteer tasks will attract workers? How can organi-
zations reach detached constituencies? Are there some organizations that are more appealing than others, and if so, why? More detailed analyses of these and other questions will be explored over the next few years.

In order to attract more volunteers, Jewish orga-
nizations must rethink their goals and procedures, taking into account the increasing professionalism and time constraints among potential volunteers:

- Volunteer tasks must be more creative, utiliz-
ing individuals’ professional skills, rather than assigning menial tasks that alienate many indi-
viduals.

- Have people donate their work skills, i.e., physi-
cians, accountants and others, to needy client popula-
tions.

- Schedules of meetings and tasks must accommo-
date the increasing number of women who are employed. This applies to both the frequency and the times meetings are scheduled.

- Fewer numbers of men and women seem to want meetings for their own sake, i.e. social interaction alone, with only a vague organiza-
tional purpose. It is easier to mobilize vol-
unteers for organized, efficient work meetings around a clearly defined goal.

Without substantial changes, volunteerism for Jewish organizations is likely to attract smaller and smaller numbers of participants.

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