

## Op-Ed: Jewish Groups Must Bring Young Volunteers on Board

by Jon Rosenberg & Lee I. Sherman

Like most nonprofits today, Jewish organizations struggle to fulfill all the needs of their client base with limited resources, as competition for funding dollars climbs, government support declines, and staff are stretched thin. And like most nonprofits, we are able to boost the impact of our programs through the help of volunteers. Some 62.8 million volunteers in the United States provided over 8 billion hours of their time to nonprofits in 2010, at an estimated dollar value of \$160 billion. Clearly, volunteers are an important asset to any nonprofit organization.

But for Jewish organizations, engaging volunteers holds another critically important place in the fulfillment of our missions. It provides the link between the Jewish community at large and its Jewish communal organizations that is essential for the perpetuation of our people. Therefore, it is time for us to rethink the role of volunteers and rethink how we're working with them -- especially the next generation of young adult volunteers.

Engaging young adults as volunteers with Jewish nonprofits has drawn much attention lately. There is no issue of willingness to volunteer among young Jews. According to Repair the World's 2011 Volunteering + Values report, 78% of young Jewish women and 63% of young Jewish men said they had volunteered during the 12 months prior to the survey. Their volunteerism in general now consists primarily of episodic, one-shot engagements, and most of it occurs outside of the Jewish community.

That means that there is great social spirit in the community, but it is not being channeled often enough through a Jewish lens. Young Jewish adults have a strong desire to create justice in the world. They just do not all connect this to the Jewish value of *zedakah*. They want to work hard for those who are disadvantaged. Some just do not see this work as *tikkun olam*. We must make this connection for them so they understand that their inner values are Jewish values and so they see the Jewish community as a likely vehicle through which to channel those values.

We also must create awareness of the many opportunities to volunteer that exist within the Jewish community. Young adults have varying interests. We must make them aware of the varying opportunities within Jewish communal organizations that may meet their needs. We desire to engage the important human capital provided by volunteers. But they must also know about us in order to engage with our collective work.

That's the impetus behind a new partnership between Repair the World, the service arm of the American Jewish community, and the Association of Jewish Family & Children's Agencies, the membership association for North America's 125 Jewish family service agencies.

Repair the World and AJFCA's new Volunteer Initiative Program will focus on increasing volunteer opportunities for young people at Jewish Family Services organizations and on creating meaningful, effective service that better enables Jewish family service agencies to deliver on their mission. Volunteers will help us serve those in need and we will help them connect their desire to serve with their Jewish traditions and values. Jewish family service agencies provide such a variety of services to their communities—from caring for the elderly and disabled, to lifting up the unemployed, to feeding the hungry, helping to house the poor and more. These agencies are the perfect bridge for young adults with varying passions to the Jewish community.

Of course, while reports can help us identify concerns, we won't really know what will work until we get on the ground. So starting in April, some 20 Jewish family service organizations, who are AJFCA members from across North America, will work to create better volunteer programs. They will come up with theories, put those theories into practice and help us see what works so we can spread best practices to the rest of the Jewish family service network – and then beyond to the broader Jewish nonprofit world.

In this process, we will not only be informed by good work happening already in the Jewish family service network, but also by emerging efforts in the secular service world such as the [Reimagining Service](#) and the [Cities of Service](#) initiatives.

The Jewish people has a long and distinguished history of helping others. We brought this tradition to North America more than a century ago and have practiced it through the settlement houses of the turn of the last century, the vast network of Jewish hospitals that now exist primarily for a general population, and the work of the Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society with immigrants not only from the ravaged Jewish communities of eastern Europe, but also refugees from all around the world.

Jewish family service agencies began by assisting Jewish refugees and immigrants, orphans and the poor and needy. Today, these agencies continue to provide critical services to people of all ages of all religious and cultural backgrounds; with special needs, physical needs; and through economic challenges and life-cycle changes.

It's time that we introduce this crucial work and these impressive organizations to the next generation of volunteers, supporters and advocates. It's time we foster pride in our contributions to our communities at large and enable young people to embrace their work as an entry point back into the Jewish community.