

This year I had the privilege of attending the AJFCA annual conference in Houston, TX, thanks to the generous award of the Joseph S. Kaplan Memorial Scholarship. This stipend covered the majority of my expenses including conference registration and travel. Given my agency's limited budget, I could not have participated in this level of professional development without this wonderful award.

As I reflect on the conference, I continue to feel grateful for the opportunity to engage new and exciting ideas, hear from gifted and dynamic speakers, explore best practices in Jewish communal services, and network and develop relationships with colleagues.

I arrived at this conference not only as a first-time attendee but also as the only representative from my agency. I truly "flew solo!" However, from the moment I arrived I felt a great sense of welcome and belonging. In particular, I would like to thank Lee Sherman and the AJFCA board members for greeting me so warmly. In addition, AJFCA staff made getting to and from the conference seamless. Overall, I met people in Houston, both AJFCA and IAJVS affiliates, who invited me to their tables, whether it was for a meal, to hear a speaker, or to discuss a program topic. These table invitations truly made my experience rich and memorable.

I came to the conference in large part to gain fresh knowledge that could help deepen and grow the services provided by my small agency. Having attended, I feel even more inspired and motivated to engage in projects my agency is currently undertaking or developing such a community-wide needs assessment, food bank, and older adult & special needs services, to name a few.

During the conference, Rachel Simon reminded me of the importance of inclusivity and the role of family networks in fostering inclusive communities. I learned from and shared with members of small agencies at a wonderful lunch hosted by AJFCA. I had the opportunity to hear from and connect with hardworking and dedicated agency staff at the Curbside Forums. People like Dawn Herbet from JFS Kansas City inspired me with her agency's work on aging-in-place and transportation programs for older adults, and we have been in touch since the conference regarding resources. I hope and plan for further conversations on these subjects. During the final conference plenary, Seth Cohen inspired me to ask, "Why am I connecting people?" and to develop an agency network blueprint of personal, performance, and strategic relationships.

Ultimately when I reflect upon the AJFCA conference, I think Seth Cohen's phrase captures it nicely, "There are no such things as strangers, only friends we haven't met yet." From Havdalah receptions and kosher BBQ/line dancing to conference business and meals with new colleagues, the spirit of community pervaded this gathering. I think it is this kind of connection that fosters visionary leadership, creative strategy, and ultimately excellence in professional practice. Thank you once again to the AJFCA Board and Scholarship Committee, to the AJFCA staff, and to JFS Houston for the wonderful opportunity to attend the AJFCA annual meeting.

Sincerely,  
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