



## Innovating JCCs; A New Report

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The mid-20th century Jewish community center was built on the model of a brick-and-mortar, full-service, membership-based community center. This model is increasingly out of step with today's reality. The purpose of the Innovating JCCs study was to seek out new ideas in the field and identify ways that JCCs might break through the old model to become successful 21st century agencies. **Lessons from the research are relevant not only to JCCs, but also to synagogues and other legacy institutions in the Jewish community.**

The research was initiated and funded by UJA-Federation of New York.

### Key findings:

- Longstanding JCCs often have difficulty rethinking their mission and approach. Innovating JCCs have undergone a process of clarifying their essential purpose and values. They were then able to appropriately redirect and re-imagine their structures, staffing, operations, practices, and programs.
- Innovating JCC execs understand that their agency cannot be all things to all people. They also understand that the JCC cannot win in today's marketplace with mediocre departments or programs. If their JCC is not best in class in a particular area, they are ready to eliminate the program or service, outsource it, or partner with an individual or organization that is best in class.
- Many of the executives in innovating JCCs are creatives with an entrepreneurial orientation and the qualities needed to turn ideas into action. These execs broadly seek new ideas. They use data, they listen to people, and they ask questions. They give their staff permission to try new things. They understand that innovation is not a once-and-done activity. They follow a path of incremental innovation, building from one step to the next as it becomes apparent. They are continuously on the lookout for competitive advantage and future trends.

- The traditional JCC generally relies on revenue from membership dues and fees from income-generating programs (most often fitness, day camp, and preschool). These sources are insufficient to cover the full budget. Some of the innovating JCCs have devised original ways of raising significant new revenue. Others have rethought their dues structure to optimize or stabilize revenue from membership dues.
- Some of the innovating JCCs have broadened their concept of community, expanded the idea of membership, articulated a shared purpose that gives meaning to membership, and found ways to “stay close to the customer.” This latter concept focuses on understanding participants and using their input and feedback in the design of programs and services.
- JCCs need to consider their capacity to be a center of Jewish life for the clusters of Jews living beyond easy driving distance to the building. Innovating JCCs have experimented with a variety of ways to move beyond their walls, including use of public spaces, mobile programming, and online communities and programming.
- JCCs are pluralistic agencies intended to serve all parts of the Jewish community. Innovating JCCs also think about their role in their local community more broadly. They have opened up their space and programs to a larger and more diverse population and brought new opportunities to their members and participants.
- Collaboration or partnerships are generally seen as a way that nonprofits can stay competitive in their markets. JCCs in the study have formed partnerships with one another, with other Jewish organizations, with non-Jewish organizations, and with the larger community. In each instance, much was gained from the relationship including higher quality, stronger community, greater efficiency, increased revenue, and deeper purpose.

Moving JCCs and other legacy organizations into the 21st century will entail a shift in focus from quantity to quality – a commitment to excellent programs and services and to powerful experiences for participants. Moving into the new century will also require strong leadership – high in creativity, savvy in business, and unafraid of taking action. And it will entail much broader definitions of and attention to community, engagement, and partnerships.

The full report is available [here](#).

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