This work paid off. When COVID-19 swept across the region, the difference was remarkable. Over 6,000 volunteers from 44 JDC Volunteer Centers immediately deployed to help their community members. They made essential deliveries of food and medicine, tutored children online, and taught elderly how to use smartphones to access vital services and keep in touch with family and friends.

Igor, 20, is a prime example of how community responsibility is once again part of the former Soviet Union Jewish identity. “During the pandemic, I’ve been focusing on elderly in my community, as they’re the most vulnerable,” says Igor. “I hated to think they might feel no one was there to help. Helping others is everyone’s responsibility.”

JEWISH COMMUNITY LEADERS AND VOLUNTEERS SPRUNG INTO ACTION

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The long-term investment that JDC donors made in strengthening communities proved its mettle during the pandemic. JCCs built, the leaders trained, and the networks of skilled volunteers created during times of calm became invaluable in bolstering community resilience once COVID-19 hit.

This is especially evident in the former Soviet Union. Just six years ago — during the conflict in Ukraine — there was no way to speedily mobilize volunteers during the emergency. Volunteers were few and far between. The eradication of volunteer culture in the region was a lingering Soviet legacy even 20 years after Jewish life had been rekindled there. A key part of JDC’s effort to help rebuild caring Jewish communities is to reinstate a culture of volunteerism in them.

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Igor has been volunteering for nearly three years through his local JDC-supported Volunteer Center. He says that this experience made him realize we all have a responsibility to help.