

# Agencies come together to fight poverty

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Although Jewish social service agencies across the country have spent decades working to alleviate poverty in their respective communities, as national Jewish poverty rates continue to climb, service providers are banding together to try a new approach.

Earlier this month, the National Think Tank on Jewish Poverty in Canada – a group established last year and led by agencies including Jewish Family Services in Ottawa and Vancouver, Jewish Immigrant Aid Service (JIAS) in Toronto, and various federations across the country – released a statement that said raising awareness about Jewish poverty is the first step toward alleviating it.

“We cannot change what we don’t acknowledge... We need to develop community-specific responses to the needs of our members living in poverty. We need to invest in our youth and support our seniors. We need to hold governments accountable and ensure that they create, fund and deliver adequate social and economic policies, programs and services to end injustices, including poverty, and

prevent them, to the benefit of our communities as part of the greater whole... We need to act,” the statement said.

“While the issue of poverty is managed on a provincial basis, this national body strives to be part of a national solution – to share best practices, broaden awareness and delve deeper into the specific differences and strategies within the Jewish community.”

In Toronto, Hillel Toronto, Jewish Family & Child (JF&CS), JIAS Toronto, Jewish Vocational Services (JVS) Toronto, Kehilla Residential Programme, Miles Nadal JCC, UFC/UIA and Ve’ahavta, convened by UJA Federation of Greater Toronto, are all working together to break the cycle of poverty.

Last week, after the United Nations’ International Day for the Eradication of Poverty, these agencies held a Jewish Poverty Awareness Day, during which information tables were set up at Jewish institutions in the GTA, and people were encouraged to take an online Jewish poverty quiz.

Robin Gofine, vice-president of strategic community planning and engagement at UJA Federation of Greater Toronto, and head of its “Collective Impact Strategy” on poverty, said federation has started to think about large-scale social issues in a

very different way.

“We decided as an organization, with the input and support of the [agency heads] around the table, including Richard Cummings at JF&CS, Janis Roth at JIAS Toronto, Lori Shekter-Wolfson at JVS and Nancy Singer at Kehilla, to look at developing collectively a strategy to address and hopefully reduce poverty in the Jewish community of Toronto,” Gofine said.

She said a major portion of funds raised by the annual UJA campaign go toward addressing poverty. In 2013, the federation allocated 15 per cent of its annual campaign funds – \$7.6 million – to social services.

“Jewish Family and Child, on a daily basis, is addressing poverty in the Jewish community and supporting the Jewish poor in Toronto in many ways. JVS is looking at employment issues, Kehilla is looking at housing issues, but we have never as a community banded together to look at impacting the system in a large and comprehensive and significant way. So that is really the exciting opportunity,” she said.

Fran Chodak, a JF&CS social worker, is the co-ordinator of a new program called the STEP (Striving to End Poverty) project, which aims to provide people with access to education, and career and life skills programs to achieve financial independence, as well as access to JF&CS services.

She said that the idea is also to partner with other local agencies that are working toward the same goals.

“I think there is an effort now for agencies to gather together around this issue, and we’re starting to do so more and more. Now we have this STEP program that we are initiating that we hope will be a unique way of delivering some services that will empower people to move out of poverty,” Chodak said.

“One of the projects that STEP will undertake is to raise awareness in the Jewish community about Jewish poverty, but also to raise awareness in the general community that there is Jewish poverty.”



Fran Chodak

In Montreal, Leah Berger, a senior planning associate for Federation CJA in its department of strategic planning and community relations, is co-ordinator of the federation’s social advocacy committee, a coalition of local social service agencies and groups. She said the coalition focuses mainly on changing policy.

“The social service programs that are provided by our frontline social service agencies have a critical impact on individuals and families who are living in poverty. The social advocacy committee approaches these issues from a policy perspective, meaning that until the policy, until the core of the issue is addressed, the problem will never truly be addressed,” Berger said. “It’s an inclusive approach, meaning that we seek improved social policies for all Quebecers, and we seek to accomplish this by linking up with larger coalitions, organizations Quebec-wide in the larger community.”

Susan Karpman, director of community services and immigration at Ometz, an employment and social service provider in Montreal, said poverty can’t be solved by the Jewish community alone.

“That’s why we do invest a lot of resources in terms of working with and advocating... for a [better] living wage, for reasonable welfare benefits, for cost of living, day care,” Karpman said.

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Russians less likely to intermarry

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said she is a "so-called ba'al tshuvah... unfortunately, a minority in the Russian-speaking Jewish community." "I think the idea of Limmud is good," she said, "but I would like to have seen a bit more Jewish content - by that, I mean Torah content."

The question of difference was addressed at a panel discussion titled "What Makes Russian Jews Jewish," featuring Anna Shternshis, a professor at U of T's Centre for Jewish Studies, Yigal Kotler, a doctoral candidate at the Jewish Theological Seminary and Olga Levitski, a

PhD candidate in sociolinguistics at the University of Ottawa. They discussed factors such as shared memory, a community bolstered not by religious observance but resistance to fascism, and a lack of acceptance of Russian Jews by "mainstream Jews" in Canada.

But they also noted that, as the Pew Research Center's recent "Portrait of Jewish Americans" shows, secularization and intermarriage among North American Jewry is rising steeply and that FSU Jews are actually more likely not to intermarry and to feel more connected to Israel. ■

Poverty is not uniquely Jewish

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Federation CJA committed \$6.8 million of it \$30.8 million 2014 campaign tally to social services.

"What has changed in the last decade for sure is the focus on capacity-building and strength-building programs targeting younger people. Here at Ometz, working with youth is a priority. It doesn't diminish the work we're doing with people in chronic poverty, people with mental health issues where we are looking to increase their quality of life, as well as their skills and capacity. But in particular with youth, we're looking to break the cycle of poverty by providing academic support programs, financial capacity building is a big focus for us so that people understand the implications of their decisions today and how they can plan for their future," she said.

The hope is that if children living in poverty do better in school, are better fed and have better access to affordable housing, it will help them break the cycle, but she said Jewish agencies can't do it alone.

"I would stress the need for collaboration with the broader community, in terms of looking at Jewish poverty. Poverty is not uniquely a Jewish issue and the solutions are not going to be uniquely Jewish community issues and we really need to work in collaboration with other groups, with other coalitions, because if that stereotype still exists of Jews being different and affluent, this is another way to combat that stereotype, and it is another way to be effective, and we need that broader social movement in order to look at poverty on a macro scale," Karpman said. ■

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