

REDEFINING CITIZENSHIP SERVICES: THE CASE FOR JEWISH COMMUNAL INVOLVEMENT

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INTRODUCTION

In its 1997 report to Congress entitled *Becoming an American: Immigration and Immigrant Policy*, the U.S. Commission on Immigration Reform asserts that naturalization "is the most important act that a legal immigrant undertakes in the process of becoming an American. Taking this step confers upon the immigrant all the rights and responsibilities of civic and political participation that the United States has to offer (except to become President)" (Pinkus, 1997, p. 14). We can think of no better time to discuss the role of citizenship in becoming an American than in the wake of the September 11 terrorist attack. As the nation heals, Americans are once again going through the highly charged debate over immigration and immigrant policy, and all immigrants—including Jewish new Americans—will be affected by the outcome. The pendulum swings of immigrant policy further underscore that the full security of "belonging" to American society can only be guaranteed through citizenship.

Becoming a citizen is viewed by most immigrants as a way to raise social status and boost self-esteem. Among the benefits are the right to vote, the ability to sponsor family members abroad to emigrate to the United States, and a heightened sense of participation and belonging in one's new country. According to a recent unpublished study, approximately 30,000 Jewish new Americans have emigrated to the Philadelphia region in the past 20 years, and a growing number of émigrés arrive as immigrants, out-

side of the refugee resettlement system (RINA, 2001, p. 9).

For many years, HIAS and Council Migration Service of Philadelphia (HIAS and Council) was the primary Jewish communal agency in Philadelphia that assisted individuals in completing applications and navigating the naturalization process. Young émigrés learned English at school or on the job, and studied course books. English as a Second Language (ESL) classes for the elderly were provided by the Philadelphia Jewish Community Centers' (JCCs) David Neuman Senior Center (hereinafter the David Neuman Senior Center). Citizenship classes, which combine the teaching of English and civics, were provided by the David Neuman Senior Center and other JCCs on an as-needed basis. There was limited recognition in the Philadelphia Jewish community of the need to provide citizenship services that combined application assistance and education. The lack of emphasis on naturalization assistance or citizenship education was not unique to the Jewish community; between World War II and the mid 1990s, the annual number of immigrants in the United States who became naturalized never exceeded 400,000. In fiscal year 1996, when legal immigrants were initially denied social welfare benefits unless they were naturalized, the number jumped to one million (GAO Report, 1999, p. 1).

This article describes models of citizenship services offered by the Philadelphia Jewish community, particularly since 1996. It explores the unique challenges of teaching the educated, literate elderly population from

the former Soviet Union so they are comfortable with the oral and written aspects of the citizenship examination. The authors believe that our communal organizations are well positioned not only to assist elderly and other new immigrants to pass the naturalization interview but also to expand the concept of citizenship to include the teaching of civics and public participation. It stresses how innovative citizenship programs can provide opportunities for volunteerism in the Jewish community, interagency collaborations, and partnerships with broader immigrant groups and can leverage additional resources.

HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE

Requirements of Citizenship

From the 1960s to 1994, the general requirements for naturalization remained fairly stable as set forth in the Immigration and Nationality Act. Individuals had to be at least 18 years of age; have resided in the United States as a lawful permanent resident continuously for five years; have the ability to speak, read, and write basic English; have knowledge of U.S. history and government; and be a person of good moral character. Until about fifteen years ago, every applicant for citizenship had to bring two witnesses to attest to their good moral character. The provision of application and processing assistance for this type of interview was done by HIAS and Council Migration Service. Once the requirement for witnesses was abolished, attention was focused on ensuring that the naturalization application was completed properly and assessing whether the applicants could demonstrate their knowledge of English and civics.

Some immigrants can be excused from the full requirement to speak English. For example, an applicant who is over 50 years old and who has lived in the United States for twenty years can take the examination in his or her native language. In 1996, however, many of the Soviet émigrés had not lived in this country long enough to take advantage of these waivers. In 1994 there was a further

loosening of the English/civics requirement for the disabled. The exemption from the citizenship examination is known as a “disability” waiver. While available, the disability waiver was not often used, especially since there were few guidelines on how to apply for it. The law continued to change, and as recently as November, 2001 those who qualified for a disability waiver had to demonstrate to an immigration officer that they were competent to understand the citizenship oath and the swearing of allegiance to the United States. Severely disabled individuals could still not obtain citizenship. Now, comprehension of the oath is not a requirement. Almost all individuals who can obtain medical evidence of their disability can now be naturalized.

Impact of Welfare Reform in Expanding Citizenship Services

“They were coming in stretchers to apply for citizenship,” explained a long-time HIAS and Council caseworker when she recounted the fear that gripped the Jewish new American community immediately after the passage in August, 1996 of the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act (PRWORA, also commonly known as welfare reform). Initially PRWORA denied important social welfare benefits to legal immigrants, including medical assistance, Supplemental Security Income (SSI—an income maintenance program for individuals who are not eligible for full Social Security), and Food Stamps. Due to lobbying and pressure from coalitions of groups, in which the Jewish community played an active role, these benefits were restored to many refugees. At the current time, however, refugees entering after 1996 can only receive seven years of benefits, and legal immigrants are still barred from many safety net benefits.¹

¹Many states permit legal immigrants to obtain safety need benefits, especially medical assistance. However, state funds and not federal funds must be used for this purpose. Pennsylvania is a state where legal immigrants have access to medical assistance.

Since there was no certainty initially that benefits would be restored, the Philadelphia Jewish Federation agencies expanded or developed programs to assist the most vulnerable gain citizenship. The JCCs established a regular schedule of citizenship classes for the elderly, and HIAS and Council hired additional staff to help eligible refugees and immigrants who could not learn English or civics apply for disability waivers. This expansion of citizenship services was made possible by an emergency grant from the Jewish Federation and by funding from the Soros Foundation granted to the United Jewish Communities (Council of Jewish Federations at the time) for distribution to local communities. Additionally, funding from area foundations that matched another Soros grant was made available. Finally, funding from the state originating from the Office of Refugee Resettlement, which focused on elderly refugees, was also utilized.

The initial denial of safety net benefits to refugees energized the entire immigrant community. HIAS and Council joined with other groups to provide workshops and technical assistance on the citizenship process. Our role in developing and disseminating materials to the broader immigrant community resulted in further requests for joint activity. A special partnership emerged with the Southeast Asian community to assist patients of a community mental health center. This partnership, described more fully below, continues to this day and has been kept going by foundation funding.

MODELS OF SERVICE SINCE 1996

Citizenship Classes

The David Neuman Senior Center had been serving immigrant and refugee elders, predominantly from the former Soviet Union, since 1981. Taught by volunteers, the David Neuman Senior Center's English-language classes became formally structured in 1986, when it received funding from the Pennsylvania Department of Education, Division of Adult Basic and Literacy Educa-

tion. Since that time, the English as a Second Language (ESL) Program has offered a unique curriculum, designed specifically to serve the senior adult population, taught by teachers who are readily accessible to their students and sensitized to the needs of older learners within small (limited to 15 students) classes.

The experience of the David Neuman Senior Center in providing ESL proved to be extremely valuable in developing models of teaching citizenship. Older learners have slower learning processes that are a direct result of the aging process. They may experience obstacles due to changes in hearing, memory, vision, and mobility, yet are still able to learn, comprehend, and participate in the process of active citizenship. Traditional ESL programs, however, often fail to meet the needs of limited English-speaking elders. Unaccustomed to learning in traditional settings, elders become frustrated and find it difficult to keep up with the pace of instruction. Those who have limited English and native language literacy also find print-oriented instruction another barrier to participation. It is necessary to provide smaller chunks of material with frequent repetition and review.

The Federal definition of English Language/Civics includes two components—citizenship education and civic participation education. Citizenship education teaches immigrants the basic skills needed to pass the Immigration and Naturalization (INS) exam, including knowledge of the English language. Civic participation education teaches immigrants how to be active community members and why they should be active by providing them with a comprehensive understanding of U.S. culture, government, and the educational system (Terrill, 2000).

Preparation for the Citizenship Test

The citizenship test currently consists of the Immigration Officer asking for an oral or written response to 10 questions out of 100 previously established questions. In addition, the applicant is asked to write down several

sentences dictated by the Immigration Officer.

At the David Neuman Senior Center, citizenship instruction encompasses twenty sessions, taught by bilingual instructors with the assistance of non-accented English speakers. Temple University's Project SHINE (Students Helping in the Naturalization of Elders) sends college students to the Center. Project SHINE adds another unique component to the instructional process—intergenerational interaction with college students. The participation of SHINE students not only enriches the language portion of the learning but also helps build bridges and understanding between older immigrants and native or Americanized college students.

Center teachers collaborate with HIAS and Council on several levels. A HIAS and Council representative gives periodic workshops to teachers on "Immigration 101," which discusses changes in citizenship processing and immigration issues. HIAS and Council staff members are available to Center staff to answer any questions regarding the citizenship process that may arise. The Center also refers individuals to HIAS and Council for application assistance.

Elderly learners have a high level of anxiety about the citizenship examination; some have found the stress so unbearable they have ended up in the hospital with strokes. The stress of taking the citizenship examination increased when, three years ago, the examination changed from a written examination to an oral one with a written component. For the highly literate population that has come from the former Soviet Union, taking a written examination, which is subject to clear rules of memorization, is always far easier than oral interviews. This is because in using language, similar sounding words can have vastly different meanings, depending on the context. One student summed up the problem when she came into class and exclaimed:

This language is too difficult! There is a purple vegetable I like to eat—*beets*. When I go to Atlantic City, I like to walk on the sand—*the*

beets (*beach*). You see these things I am wearing around my neck? They are called *beets* (*beads*). And today, while I was waiting for the bus, a woman gave me a push; I pushed her back and she called me a *son of a beets* (*bitch*).

You see what I mean, *beets*, *beets*, *beets* and *beets*. All sounds the same to me.

Even questions concerning the citizenship application itself can be challenging. Students are able to answer, "How many years have you been married," but are floored by this question, which is on the application: "How many times have you been married?" This is often answered by the number of years a person is married, such as "25." "What is your family name?" was easy, but "Tell me your surname" was difficult.

The mission of the Center's instruction is to put people in control of their own lives through a variety of teaching/learning techniques. Students are encouraged to practice any new language skills with neighbors, friends, family, or anyone who will listen. Cross-cultural discussion groups with Americans at the Center have been developed to allow students to use their new language skills.

Students are encouraged to engage in focused listening. It is difficult for seniors to understand English at normal speed in everyday contexts, because they try to understand every word spoken, rather than listen for the overall message. Using practical exercises such as taking a message over the phone, students learn how to listen for details, sort out information, and make inferences. Students are given a message to relay one by one over the phone. The message requires them to do something, which includes bringing a picture, shopping for an item in a specific aisle in the market, asking their grandchildren to read a book with them, etc.

Role-playing the actual citizenship interview alleviates test anxiety; its importance cannot be overemphasized. The SHINE students or other English-speaking volunteers play the role of Immigration Officers. Role-playing the actual interview provides for cre-

ative discussions. Teachers use a variety of multiple-choice questions, dictations, and listening exercises with audio and videotapes. All the teaching strategies are designed to replicate, as closely as possible, the actual questions and format of the interview. When students go for their interviews and return to the class to report success, the students who have not yet been called for their appointments question them about the experience. Then students practice answering any new questions that had been asked.

Civics

Graduates of citizenship classes are perfect candidates to transition into a civics education class. In such a class advanced ESL students can learn how government really works and how to gain access to government, social, and institutional services. The civics class at the David Neuman Senior Center has reinforced for students the need to continue to pursue English and become more adept at finding their way through the maze of services that Philadelphia has to offer. Guest speakers have come to speak to the civics students about the role of City Council, the Constitution as a living document, electing a President, and literacy in society. Learners are working on a community improvement project—developing a manual for new immigrants in the area—that will help attract and keep immigrants in Northeast Philadelphia. Students work collaboratively, thereby placing the teacher in the role of facilitator.

The course also includes an anthology of videotapes using real-life dramas and text materials that are contextually rich and evocative for classroom discussion and debate. The tapes provide a framework for developing an understanding of the rights, privileges, and responsibilities accorded to citizens.

An exciting outgrowth of the civics curriculum is the formation of an immigrant authors' book discussion group. Participants read a variety of immigrant authors, including Amy Tan, Sandra Cisneros, and Eva Hoffman. All of these authors deal with cul-

tural adjustment and language barriers in their works. Discussing the books gives students an opportunity to reflect, commiserate, and express themselves in a safe environment. The composition of the immigrant authors' book club has become more culturally reflective of the demographics in Northeast Philadelphia and puts a human face on the American value of multi-culturalism.

Well over 300 of the Center's students have become citizens since 1997 as a direct result of the classes offered at the Center. Today, the ESL program, citizenship preparation classes, and civics instruction provide a continuum of services to older refugees and immigrants. The program views older learners as life-long learners and works to keep them part of the mainstream of adult learners.

Assistance to the Disabled and Homebound Elderly

Given the fact that 39 percent of recent new Americans in Philadelphia were over 55 in 2001 (RINA, 2001) and that a good portion may not be able to learn English or civics, HIAS and Council focused on this vulnerable population for its services. Very little outreach needed to be done; HIAS and Council is well-known in the community as a provider of citizenship services. Our collaboration with the JCCs also enabled us to receive referrals from teachers of students who were identified in the classes as requiring a medical waiver.

The first step in serving the elderly and disabled population was to develop staff and agency expertise. Our focus was to develop the knowledge base and accreditation of the bilingual Russian-English staff, since most applicants would have an interview in Russian. Staff members attended training sessions to learn more about the disability waiver process, and senior staff trained junior staff in procedures. Under current regulations, individuals working at agencies recognized by the Department of Justice can apply to become "accredited" to represent individuals at immigration interviews. As a

recognized organization, HIAS and Council worked to accredit two staff members who themselves were Jewish refugees from the former Soviet Union. The process, which included auditing an immigration law class, took about one year.

HIAS and Council also worked closely with medical providers. Each person's doctor must complete a special form, in language that is acceptable to the Immigration and Naturalization Service explaining the patient's disability and how it prevents them from learning English and/or civics. HIAS and Council staff members contact family members and doctors for additional information if it is lacking. Because of this relationship, several medical providers have referred clients to our organization, as illustrated below.

A.D. is 107 years old and a patient in a nursing home. Her doctor contacted HIAS and Council to see if we could help in the application process. A.D. was sent to a Nazi labor camp in the 1940s and entered the United States in the 1950s. She is lucid and was clear that she wanted to become a citizen so she could vote. HIAS and Council helped her complete her application and she attended a citizenship ceremony with three generations of relatives beaming. It received extensive press coverage since A.D. was the oldest person in our region ever to obtain citizenship.

The citizenship application process involves an interview with an applicant by a HIAS and Council staff member and completion of the naturalization form. Most of the clients live in Northeast Philadelphia where refugee resettlement services are housed. HIAS and Council maintains only a Center City officer because of its frequent need to visit the INS. Outreach sites were needed, and they were graciously provided by the David Neuman Senior Center and the Jewish Employment and Vocational Service (JEVS) Center for New Americans. Once again, our collaboration with sister agencies enabled the provision of more effective services to vulnerable clients. Those who are

too disabled to travel to outreach sites are scheduled for home visits, which are coordinated with family members. Because we get to know the family and the applicant in the course of these interviews, we sometimes discover other unmet needs and can refer cases to the appropriate Jewish agency.

The applicant must be interviewed by an immigration officer, and finally, be sworn in. HIAS and Council collaborated with the local INS to coordinate home visits to the disabled. At first, INS had very strict standards about what constituted a "homebound" case and were reluctant to visit unless a person could not walk to the front door. The executive director of HIAS and Council met with the district director and other supervisors at the local INS office to work out an acceptable arrangement that would accommodate the disabled, but would take into account the limited resources and staff time available at the local INS. Eventually, as we smoothed out procedures, the local INS allocated one officer to work with us. Every few months, the officer teams with an accredited representative and visits several applicants in one day.

The culmination of the citizenship process is the swearing-in ceremony. The David Neuman Center agreed to provide a site for community-based citizenship ceremonies, which are held when needed. These ceremonies provide additional advantages—other David Neuman Senior Center participants (many American born) are invited to attend and are invariably moved by the event. This in turn builds bridges between the elderly native born Jewish community and the new American community.

A slightly different approach has been taken with the Southeast Asian community. Most of the citizenship applicants from Southeast Asian are younger and mobile, but have severe mental disabilities, largely residual from the Indochinese war. A local community mental health center provides a caseworker who speaks the language of the applicant and accompanies the applicant to the HIAS and Council office. The case-

worker helps gather the medical and other documentation needed to complete the application. Foundation funding has helped us continue this service, which has resulted in important bonds between the Asian immigrant community and the Jewish community. A typical referral from that collaboration is the case of G.P. described below:

G.P. was separated from his mother in Vietnam when he was 16. He was ushered into a refugee camp and then sent to the United States. G.P. was afraid to travel back to Vietnam unless he was a citizen, because he thought he would not then be able to return to the United States where he has a wife and two children. G.P. was injured on his head when he worked on a fishing boat and is subject to dizziness and double vision. He came to HIAS and Council for help with citizenship. G.P. was excused from the written portion of the test and passed the oral portion. Now, over 20 years later, he feels safe to return to Vietnam for a visit with his mother who is still alive.

Since 1997, our project for the homebound and disabled has served over 1,000 Jewish applicants and over 100 Southeast Asians. HIAS and Council has become the largest provider of naturalization services for the disabled in Pennsylvania.

CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES FOR THE FUTURE

Promoting the Value of Basic Citizenship Service

A major challenge facing agencies providing the continuum of citizenship services is that funding has been curtailed because of the perspective that the "crisis"—the loss of safety net benefits for refugees—is over. However, refugees entering after 1996 still face an uncertain future with respect to some benefits, and immigrants cannot obtain many public benefits unless they become citizens. HIAS and Council Migration Service has been successful in attracting funds both from the Jewish Federation and outside foundation

sources to provide basic application services for the elderly and disabled by pointing out that becoming a citizen is a poverty reduction strategy. In Philadelphia, we have focused on providing services to the elderly, although there is certainly a need for combined English/citizenship classes for some younger members of the population. This may be an area for future exploration and expansion.

Some funders have responded to the need to include service to immigrants, in addition to service to refugees, in any basic citizenship program. Generally only non-governmental funds are available for these basic services, especially when extended to immigrants. In some cases, charging nominal fees also helps fund such a program.

Developing Appropriate Outcome Measurements

Government and private funding streams often allocate funds for combined ESL/civics programs, and require learning outcomes and standardized testing that are based on educating young adults. Since elderly populations are unable to meet these learning outcomes, it is not feasible to utilize these funds for senior learners. Funders should be made aware of the value of citizenship education and life-long learning for elderly new Americans so that appropriate criteria for measuring successful programs can be developed. The Jewish community can become advocates with the Department of Education and other potential funders for new measurement techniques that take into account the different learning needs of the elderly and disabled.

Beyond "Passing the Test": Opportunities for Civic Engagement

There are smaller numbers of refugees from the former Soviet Union entering the United States each year. The wisdom and experience gained from working with refugees and immigrants in the past twenty years, when combined with Jewish values of

education and community involvement, provide an excellent framework in which to examine the next phase of instruction: assimilation and acculturation. Jewish agencies that work with new Americans are in a unique position to develop initiatives that go beyond teaching "rote memorization" used to pass a test. Civics classes that explore a real community problem and attempt to find solutions can provide learning laboratories in civic engagement. For example, the David Neuman Senior Center civics class invited a Philadelphia City Councilman to the class to talk with him on how to make Philadelphia more welcome to new Americans. Class participants had to present their ideas in English and engage in active give-and-take. They discussed better transportation and the need for disseminating information about city agencies. As a result of the discussion, the City Councilman began working on obtaining special buses for the elderly in the Northeast.

Building Collaborations and Partnerships

In Philadelphia the two agencies that collaborate most frequently in the citizenship area are HIAS and Council Migration Service and the JCCs. However, other communities may have different service delivery systems that will lead to different collaborations. In communities where the Jewish Family Services agency has provided an array of refugee services, partnering with a JFS may be more appropriate. Jewish Vocational and Employment Service agencies may be the focal point of refugee and immigrant services in other regions. Collaborating can increase the quality and quantity of services offered and attract more diverse funding.

Government is increasingly turning to consortiums and partnerships to fund ESL and citizenship education. These consortiums include other ethnic and immigrant groups. Jewish agency participation in such consortiums can attract new funding and provide opportunities for new programming that links Jewish new Americans to the broader immigrant com-

munity, enriching learning experiences and building inter-group bridges.

"Jewish" Civics

This article has been driven by the perspective that becoming a citizen and learning English are important civic and acculturation milestones for new Americans that ought to be promoted by the Jewish community. The programs described here are all held in Jewish agencies and also encourage involvement with the larger Jewish community—a type of Jewish acculturation and "Jewish" civics.

Classes that are held in a JCC with a strong Jewish ambience and with intergenerational programming with the synagogues in the area bring people together around their common Jewish heritage. Immigrants and refugees have learned to feel safe being Jewish, which paves the way for connecting with the larger Jewish community.

At the David Neuman Senior Center, refugees from the FSU have participated in Ayn Mishpocha ("One Family"), a group that met to discuss differences and similarities between new Americans and native Americans. Refugees and immigrants have formed a Russian-speaking KIV Club, which celebrates Jewish holidays; it even celebrated its thirteenth anniversary with an actual Bar Mitzvah with representatives reading the Torah. The KIV Club brings in guest speakers from the Russian radio station to inform its participants about the world situation. It also raises money for Israel and gives its members the opportunity to develop expertise in volunteer leadership by inviting them to participate in the David Neuman Senior Center's advisory board. Former clients of HIAS and Council and members of the KIV club participate in Philadelphia Jewish Federation fundraising phone-a-thons directed at the Russian community.

The services at HIAS and Council and at the David Neuman Senior Center attract many volunteers, a large number of whom are immigrants or refugees. Professional social work and law students from the FSU intern at HIAS and Council—handling

cases, answering phone inquiries, and performing research. HIAS and Council places a small number of volunteers to provide English tutoring for individuals who cannot attend classes during the day. A vast number of teachers from the FSU are teaching English and citizenship at the David Neuman Senior Center. The volunteers attend staff development workshops and develop professionally. They also demonstrate to the American Jewish community how devoted they are to helping their fellow immigrants become more adept and independent by conquering the language and learning the culture of their newly adopted homeland.

A separate program to attract younger members of the Russian community, the Program for New Americans, is housed at the Philadelphia JCCs Klein Branch. The overarching goal is integrating new Jewish Americans into the mainstream Jewish community while at the same time allowing new Americans to discover their own way of being Jewish. In order to establish a sense of pride, the Program for New Americans features a learning component that helps emigres discover their roots. Torah studies, lectures, religious services, and providing opportunities for refugees to express themselves culturally in dance and theatre are all aspects of the initiative. The program receives funding from the Jewish Federation of Greater Philadelphia.

CONCLUSION

The Jewish community has a reputation for providing quality citizenship and ESL services, both on national and local levels. In Philadelphia we have been able to maintain strong citizenship programs because of agency collaborations within the Jewish community and with other immigrant groups. However, we continue to reach out

to funders to share the need for and potential of providing a continuum of citizenship services, broadly defined. This includes basic application assistance for the disabled to ensure that refugees and immigrants most at risk maintain eligibility for basic public welfare services. Rather than view the declining number of refugees as a reason to cut citizenship programming, this period provides an opportunity for Jewish communal agencies to redefine citizenship by designing programs that include serving immigrants and that promote active civic engagement. The result is bound to be increased participation of and by new Americans in the civic, political and economic life of the communities in which they reside.

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