

RELIGIOUS PROGRAMMING FOR NURSING HOME RESIDENTS

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After the only Jewish nursing home in Rhode Island closed in 1993, a program developed under the auspices of the Jewish Family Service to create a Jewish nursing home without walls for the Jewish residents of secular institutions. An external evaluation of this program found that there is considerable room for broadening religious involvement in the nursing home, although residents' demand for religious programming may be superseded by their interest in stimulation and interaction.

Sectarian nursing homes have a long history in the United States, stemming from a Judeo-Christian tradition of charity for elderly persons (Achenbaum, 1993). Several recent studies have indirectly attested to the benefits of such religiously based care by documenting the positive effects of religion on health and aging (Koenig et al., 1988; Levin, 1994). Although the issue of religion and aging has largely been neglected by academics, clerics, and laypeople alike (Kaye & Monk, 1989; Larson et al., 1994), efforts to sensitize clergy to the needs of elderly parishioners (Filinson, 1988; Thompson & Payne, 1989; Tobin et al., 1986) and to augment the exposure of older adults to religion (Richards, 1990) have corroborated the value of sustained religious activity for elderly persons.

If a religiously infused environment is beneficial for older adults, what is the likely impact of removing older people from this environment? Is a religious atmosphere irreplaceable, its deprivation leading to the loss of a vital role and sense of identity that renders the older person less capable of coping with life events? The possibility of these inimical consequences was recognized by concerned advocates for the elderly in

Rhode Island, where the only Jewish nursing home in the state closed in 1993. The 165 former residents not only confronted the traumatic aftermath of its abrupt and litigious closure but also, in most cases, needed to adapt to a secular nursing home with little or no religious programming. In anticipation of the potentially unfavorable results of relocation, leaders in the Jewish community were determined to devise alternative ways to compensate for the Jewish Home's closure by recreating its religious features in the institutions to which residents were transferred. The culmination of their efforts was a multifaceted program known by the acronym J.E.R.I. (Jewish Eldercare of Rhode Island). This article describes the elements of the program, its implementation, and its potential for replication.

J.E.R.I. PROGRAM

J.E.R.I. is a program of advocacy and outreach initially designed for the 126 former Jewish Home residents who remained in Rhode Island and were relocated to other (non-Jewish) facilities. These residents were transferred to 55 different nursing homes, but J.E.R.I. services focus primarily on the 16 nursing homes that have five or more former residents. The program operates under the auspices of Jewish Family Service, with \$121,000 of its annual budget provided by the Jewish Federation of Rhode

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Island and \$100,000 provided by The Jewish Home Corporation. It is housed in the Jewish Community Center, which offers a variety of social and educational programs for all ages. In addition to over 100 volunteers, the program has six staff members: a director, a volunteer coordinator, an educational program coordinator, two rabbis, and a secretary. The director, volunteer coordinator, and secretary work on a full-time basis, the educational program coordinator works 32 hours a week, and one rabbi works 25 hours per week and the other 11 hours. The rabbi who works fewer hours has his own congregation in the local community, whereas the other rabbi is a community chaplain employed exclusively by the J.E.R.I. program. The volunteers are recruited from Jewish-affiliated organizations, given a one-hour training plus support via telephone, and provide friendly visiting as well as other programs. Most volunteer training occurs as novices work together with veteran volunteers. Staff have a background in social services and upgrade their skills through periodic in-service training.

The varied elements of the program are intended to reproduce the variety of ways in which religion permeated the Jewish Home. The Jewish Home offered daily, Shabbat, and holiday religious services, and Jewish holidays were observed; a full-time rabbi was affiliated with the Home. Kosher food was served, and Jewish themes dominated the recreation program. In the J.E.R.I. program, the rabbis offer the spiritual aspects by conducting religious services and doing pastoral counseling. The kosher meals and celebrations of holidays, which are facilitated through the educational programs and efforts of the more sensitized staff, highlight the ritualistic aspects. The educational program coordinator develops hour-long programs, typically centered around a video with discussion, that are presented bi-monthly at the participating nursing homes. Examples of such programs are videos on dynamic women in Israel followed by a dis-

cussion or presentations on the Jewish holidays. Friendly visiting enlarges contacts and support with persons of the same religious background. Moreover, J.E.R.I. staff provide many ad hoc services that give residents a sense that they belong to a caring community, from finding suitable clothing to bringing in chopped liver sandwiches. Other components of J.E.R.I. include a hand-delivered newsletter for residents and in-service training or technical assistance for nursing homes.

The launching of the J.E.R.I. program is attributable to three factors. First, staff who were affiliated with the Jewish Home and were therefore knowledgeable about the institution and acquainted with the residents declared an interest in filling the void left by the Home's closure. Second, the organizational infrastructures of the Jewish federation, Jewish Family Service, and Jewish Community Center in Rhode Island were well established to provide the resources needed to establish the program. Third, relationships with activity directors and administrators of non-Jewish nursing homes were cultivated successfully, allowing the program's entry into facilities across the state. Activity directors in particular were instrumental in ensuring that the J.E.R.I. programs were included on the monthly calendar, rooms were made available, appropriate participants were identified, and residents were transported to the program venue.

Soon after its inception, the program needed to expand its original mission of serving only transferred residents to serving a wide cross-section of nursing home residents. It became apparent that many Jewish residents of secular nursing homes (who had not been at the Jewish Home) were eager to participate in activities with a Jewish flavor. An initial census identified 111 Jewish residents in other nursing homes; this number grew over the first year of the program to 261. Because it would have been unreasonable to exclude non-Jewish roommates and other residents from the fes-

tivities organized for the Jewish residents, ultimately the events became intercultural in participation.

PROGRAM ASSESSMENT

Within the first six months of operation, J.E.R.I. staff realized the importance of obtaining systematic and objective data about the program. The gerontology center of a local college was contacted, and arrangements were made for an external consultation. However, there were several impediments to a full-scale evaluation. First, a sizeable proportion of the former residents were cognitively impaired and would not provide valid and reliable information concerning the presence of J.E.R.I. services and their response to them. Second, to observe directly certain elements of the program, such as friendly visiting or pastoral counseling, was deemed unnecessarily obtrusive and an invasion of privacy. Third, it was considered unethical, in light of the delicacy of the issue of religious background, to identify Jewish residents (or former Jewish Home residents) and to single them out as research subjects. Fourth, the breadth of the program—with its concentration in 16 nursing homes across the state and provision of assistance to 55 in total—hampered the feasibility of a comprehensive assessment.

These self-imposed restrictions dictated the nature of the examination of the J.E.R.I. program. The approach that was devised centered predominantly on the public parts of the program—the educational presentations—at the four nursing homes with the largest proportions of Jewish residents. Once the investigator became familiar to participants of these events, indepth interviews were conducted with the mentally and physically agile residents and with staff of the nursing homes.

The principal objective of the observations was to document the mechanisms through which religious programming was conveyed and to determine their relative significance in the perceptions of partici-

pants. Although religiosity is associated with better life satisfaction, morale, and well-being (Cox & Hammonds, 1988; Holt & Dellman-Jenkins, 1992; St. Pierre, 1994), it has been unclear how religiosity exerts these positive effects. Religiosity has been correlated with social support, social integration, self-esteem, a lifestyle of moderation, coping strategies, a sense of control, and other factors (Ellison, 1994; Williams, 1994), any combination of which could explain its relationship with healthful and productive aging. Observations were intended to determine which dimensions of religious involvement are emphasized by the J.E.R.I. program and perceived as meaningful by its participants.

Ten of the educational programs conducted over a two-month period were observed by the investigator. The purpose of the observations was to gauge the religious content of the program, the type and level of involvement by residents and staff, the degree of participation by former Jewish Home residents and by Jewish residents, and the reaction of participants to the program. Informal interviews were then conducted with the four activity directors at the nursing homes and with 12 participants in the educational programs. Eight of the interviews were with former Jewish Home residents, two with Jewish residents who had not resided previously at the Jewish Home, and two with non-Jewish residents. The small number of interviews reflects the fact that no more than half of the 15 to 30 participants at the programs identified themselves as former Jewish Home or Jewish residents. The interviews were concerned with the participants' reactions to the various J.E.R.I. programs, the aspects of the program they considered most valuable, and the role of the program in sustaining their religious identity.

PROGRAM OBSERVATIONS

The most striking feature emerging from observations of the J.E.R.I. program was the subordination of its intrinsic religious com-

ponents to other functions. On the surface, the program would seem tailor-made for observant persons of the Jewish faith, with little to offer others. Many of the programs revolved around celebration of Shabbat and used the Hebrew language. Other programs did not require knowledge of religious beliefs or Hebrew, but nevertheless were grounded in custom and tradition, such as videos based in Israel and discussions about gefilte fish. Yet at least half of the program participants were not Jewish, attracted it would seem by the stimulation of the educational presentations and the congenial manner of the J.E.R.I. staffperson. The relevant motivation is disclosed in the following statements:

R11: I like the programs that Debbie S. presents. I am very fond of her. I can hear what she says because she talks loud and clear.

R12: I'm not Jewish but I've worked with and had Jewish friends. I enjoy all of Debbie S.'s programs and like her pleasant manner. I am so happy when her baby comes to visit....Schoolchildren are the highlight of my day when they visit.

For the Jewish residents, the religious content was important, but the fact that only a tiny minority requested kosher meals may indicate that other elements were more vital. The social function of the J.E.R.I. program was evident when participants would ask the rabbi, after services, to update them about people and events at the synagogues and communities with which they had been associated. Several of the Jewish respondents who were interviewed emphasized the need for being surrounded by other Jewish people:

R4: I heard there is a new resident on the third floor who is Jewish, and I'm eager to meet her.

R5: My parents were not particularly religious. My father changed his name because he wanted to "Americanize himself" (but) I

don't feel there are enough Jewish residents here. I try to find individuals with values and beliefs like I have.

R9: Our closest friends have religious values and beliefs similar to ours; we now must try to seek out friends here with different beliefs and values.

A second theme that emerged from the observations concerned program quality and its capacity to ease the transition from the Jewish Home. Staff and participants overwhelmingly praised the program and credited it with making a difficult uprooting less painful. Staff were enthusiastic about the opportunity both to broaden their schedule of activities for all residents and to ensure that they were adequately meeting the spiritual needs of this particular subgroup of residents. Residents were grateful for the program, remarking that it made the change "easier than expected." Families, made aware of the program by the calling card left at each participant's bedside, also appreciated the attention given their relatives.

There was some ambivalence among the residents as to whether J.E.R.I. accomplished its goal of creating the "Jewish Home without Walls." For example, two respondents who stated that the J.E.R.I. program was wonderful also announced at an educational program that they used to live in a much nicer place. Another respondent commented that it was different in the Jewish Home because "everyone there understood what it was to be Jewish." Such comments, however, have to be put in the context of a more general longing for the past and for old friends. It was frequently difficult to cull from the interviews a sense of how the new surroundings compared with the Jewish Home because conversations were dominated by reminiscences about careers, friends, family, and homelands now gone.

R1: When I think about Vienna, I want to cry. At the music program, I was particularly moved by the waltzes.

R6: I used to greet and wait on customers. I miss the daily contact with the clientele....I would like to see little children come to visit, or a friendly visitor of any age come to spend time talking with me.

A final set of observations has to do with impediments to program operation. The essential difficulties were logistical—insufficient support to transport residents, serve bread and wine, or turn pages in the prayerbook; disruptions caused by the proximity of other residents, family members, or staff; and interruptions created by overlaps in the schedule (with lunch, for instance). Although some activity directors expressed minor discomfort with the program because of their own religious background or their sense of having an inadequate understanding of Jewish rituals, the faulty arrangements seemed clearly unintentional, rather than deliberate.

POTENTIAL FOR REPLICATION

As already stated, the feasibility of the J.E.R.I. program is attributable to the commitment and organizational support of the religious community combined with the full cooperation of most of the state's nursing home facilities and a talented program coordinator. Other ethnic and religious groups attempting to adopt the J.E.R.I. model would need comparable assets. It should be noted, however, that J.E.R.I. was developed under less favorable conditions than other fledgling programs would face, given the crisis-driven situation of an abrupt nursing home closure, pending lawsuit, and ensuing media frenzy.

There are four valuable lessons to be learned from the J.E.R.I. experience. First, efforts to cushion the impact of relocation on nursing home residents can clearly pay off, confirming the likelihood for benign outcomes indicated in recent research (Bonardi et al., 1989; Grant et al., 1992). Although hard data are not readily available, it is notable that the number of deaths among residents that occurred during the

transition (five) is exactly the number that occurred during the same time period the year before the Jewish Home closed. Moreover, although 150 clients of the J.E.R.I. program died during the first years of operation, the caseload remained the same because of residents eager to replace those who died. The observations support Davidson and O'Connor's (1990) findings that perceived control over relocation may be less important in the long run than ultimate acceptance of the change in environment. The program seemed to minimize the sense of being dumped that the residents might have felt, stirred by a community sense of betrayal that a cherished institution had unjustly disappeared.

Second, there is considerable room for broadening the prospects for religious involvement in the nursing home, using a variety of strategies. Nursing homes are mandated to meet the spiritual as well as physical needs of their residents, yet collaboration with the ethnic or religious community may be required to authentically fulfill this objective. The J.E.R.I. program enabled nursing homes to augment their religious content directly through its programming and indirectly by serving as a liaison with local rabbis. In addition, the program could supplement the nursing home services by occasionally solving problems that were nonreligious in nature. Some residents, for instance, who were suffering from depression or were difficult to work with were referred for assessment by the social worker at Jewish Family Service with successful outcomes.

Third, the demand for religious programming may be superseded by the demand for stimulation and interaction. The findings of this study contradict those of Pardue (1991), who showed that nursing home residents preferred the private and internal side of spirituality to the collective activity and involvement in the externals of religious observance organized by visiting clergy. J.E.R.I. participants, in contrast, did not seem to crave more private opportunities for religiosity. Moreover, the J.E.R.I.

program was able to reach the large number of residents who may be too cognitively impaired to look inward and dwell on their spiritual nature, but who could still respond to the warmth, socialization—and food—offered by the educational programmer and friendly visitors. Thus, programs aimed at a single ethnic and religious group can have positive repercussions for the entire facility since their social aspects attract participants regardless of particular religious affiliation.

Finally, the J.E.R.I. experience illustrates the value of an external evaluation. Because the evaluation validated the significance of the program, it has not only been given a continuation of funding but has also enlarged its staff and the population it serves. An educational program associate has been added for eight to ten hours a week, and a friendly visitor is now on the staff, in addition to the volunteers who continue to do friendly visiting. Finally, a work-study student is with the program ten hours a week. The program has written a grant for a pilot project at an assisted living center and intends to broaden its constituency beyond nursing home residents. In addition, J.E.R.I. staff have utilized the evaluation findings to reach two general recommendations for their future planning. First, they have recognized that community outreach is vital to the program, despite their original mission being narrowly confined to former Jewish Home residents. Second, the extent of untapped need uncovered by the program suggests that funding at current levels will be inadequate. J.E.R.I. therefore plans to develop a business arm to the program that can raise funds through marketing religious service videos, prayerbooks, and staff expertise. In short, a program that was neither expected to survive its first year nor to weather the anger generated by the nursing home closure has not only justified its existence but is expected to grow substantially.

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