

The Formation of a Community-wide Youth Workers Council

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Introduction

Informal avenues of communication may exist for Jewish communal workers who deal with teenage youth but rarely does this communication transcend lines of religious affiliation or ideology. Even less frequently does this propensity become formalized. In Atlanta, Georgia, a Council was created as a forum for sharing ideas and programs, to foster an atmosphere of open communication and fellowship among Jewish youth workers, and to develop professional enrichment programs for those workers.

Formation of the Council

The beginnings of the Atlanta Jewish Youth Workers Council (hereafter referred to as A.J.Y.W.C.) were shaky indeed, but three years of experience bears out its ultimate value. The Council was initially conceived by Synagogue and Jewish Community Center youth staff who recognized a need in Atlanta for the sharing of resources, ideas, and facilities among the various Jewish youth groups. We found ourselves competing for the same youngsters at the same times with similar programming and promotions. We also recognized that funding for these programs could be better spent if youth staffs worked together on behalf of Atlanta's Jewish teenagers.

As a result of these early meetings in

1979, A.J.Y.W.C. was formed for Jewish communal workers and rabbis who deal with youth throughout the city. The Council meets on a regular basis (every 4 - 6 weeks) over lunch, rotating geographical site as well as responsibility. The host agency or synagogue is responsible for sending out the minutes of the prior meeting along with the announcement of the upcoming meeting. An overall chairman guides this process, and oversees all activities of the Youth Workers Council, acting as a liaison between the youth workers and the Jewish community at large. Participation has been widespread, growing each year, with representation from the following: local synagogues, Jewish Community Center, B'nai Brith Youth Organization, Bureau of Jewish Education, Young Judaea, American Zionist Youth Foundation, Yeshiva High School, and B'nai Brith Hillel.

During the past year, membership in A.J.Y.W.C. became more formalized by instituting an annual affiliation fee of \$25.00. This enabled the Council to utilize a small working budget for mailings, stationery, and similar administrative costs. With the public awareness engendered by community involvement, the recent delegation of all administrative and programming responsibilities, and A.J.Y.W.C.'s "own" checking account, the Council has proven that it is here to stay.

Three years later, cooperation is at its peak and the relationship between youth workers is one of friendship and mutual respect.

Projects and Activities

During its first three years, the A.J. Y.W.C. has sponsored several noteworthy community-wide programs for youth and youth workers. Among these are a Professional Enrichment Conference, Jewish Youth Festival, and Atlanta Jewish Youth Council.

1. *Professional Enrichment Conference*

The Atlanta Jewish Youth Workers Council chose a professional enrichment conference as its first major program. Topics for workshops were chosen so as to meet the needs of both highly trained professional youth workers and the many volunteer youth workers with less experience and training.

The first professional enrichment conference of the A.J.Y.W.C. was held on the afternoon and evening of October 29, 1979. Advance publicity was sent directly to members of the Council and through the local Jewish newspaper. The program began with a keynote address by the local Hillel rabbi, followed by a program exchange. The purpose of this exchange was to enable workers to share their successful programs and allow each to benefit from this pool of experience.

The first workshop session of the conference dealt with "Positive Image Producing Techniques in the Jewish Institution." The discussion centered around the difficulties many workers experience within their own agencies or institutions. Particular attention was given to methods of creating awareness and support for youth programs within these organizations.

The youth leadership of the various organizations then joined the adult workers for dinner and the evening program. The first presentation that evening was a panel

discussion on "Jewish Youth groups—Why?" Discussants included two adult youth workers and two youth group officers. The discussion centered on the motivations for joining a Jewish youth group, and the differences between the membership of a community-based group and a synagogue-based group.

Following this joint session, youth workers participated in a workshop on "The Role of the Group Leader," led by the director of the Jewish Community Center. This discussion dealt with group processes and the role of the youth worker as facilitator. Concurrently, youth leaders participated in a "Jewish Awareness Workshop" to discuss aspects of religious and educational programming.

An evaluation of the conference was given at the next meeting of the Youth Workers Council. Overall response to the conference was quite positive. Although some sessions seemed to meet the needs primarily of the more experienced workers, most of the conference was helpful to all. The possibility of gearing some workshops at future conferences to the less experienced workers was explored. It was also decided that a professional enrichment presentation would be featured regularly at business meetings of the Council.

2. *Jewish Youth Festival*

One stated purpose of the A.J.Y.W.C. is "to foster and strengthen a bond between all Jewish youth organizations . . ." To further this goal, the first Atlanta Jewish Youth Festival was held on Sunday, January 18, 1981.

The Youth Festival was to be an educational program of exhibits and activities devoted to the city's Jewish youth. Funding for the program came from various sources: A \$100 sponsorship of each participating youth organization, patron tickets to a Family Concert held as part of the Festival, \$100 sponsorship of various community organizations, and sale of ads at \$30 each

included in a printed program.

The Festival was held at a local synagogue, Ahavath Achim, from 1:00 - 5:00 p.m. Exhibit space was offered to:

A. Jewish Youth Organizations. Displays included program materials, membership information, scrapbooks, slide shows, and publications. A full range of community, synagogue, and Zionist youth groups were represented.

B. Educational Programs for Youth. The local Yeshiva High School and Atlanta High School of Jewish Studies displayed materials relating to their programs. In conjunction with a local bookstore, books of Jewish interest were offered for sale.

C. Non-profit Organizations Serving Youth. Those organizations who serve or involve youth were invited to participate. These included Jewish agencies, such as Jewish Family and Children's Bureau and non-sectarian agencies, such as Institute for Adolescent Studies, DeKalb Addiction Center, March of Dimes, Peace Corps/VISTA, etc.

D. Jewish Communal Organizations. While not involved primarily in youth work, the Jewish National Fund and the Israeli Consulate participated actively in planning and displays.

Over twenty-five organizations sponsored displays at the Youth Festival.

In addition to displays, a stage was set aside for "public access" and special programs, including performances by a local day school chorale and area youth groups.

A massive effort was made to encourage participation in the Youth Festival. Publicity was sent through all Jewish youth group mailings, synagogue bulletins and announcements, local newspapers, and radio announcements. In addition, all participating youth groups made the festival their activity for the day. Finally, to encourage people to stay through the day, food was available at a minimal cost throughout the festival.

The vast majority of advanced planning

for the festival was done by the members of A.J.Y.W.C. Youth group members were involved primarily in planning and staffing the individual exhibits of their organizations, ticket sales, and ushering.

Because the community (both adult and youth) does not have frequent opportunities for exposure to Jewish music, it was decided to host a family concert as the concluding part of the Festival. A Boston-based group, Safam, performed. The concert was the only part of the program involving an admission charge. Regular and sponsor tickets were sold in advance at youth organizations, synagogues, and Jewish Community Center, as well as at the door.

The program was quite successful. Approximately 600 people of all ages attended the festival and concert. The Festival accomplished its goal of bringing together Jewish youth to exchange information about participating organizations and agencies. It also provided much needed publicity for the individual youth groups, and for the Atlanta Jewish Youth Workers Council in the community.

Subsequent evaluation identified two problems in the Festival. The first was the lack of youth involvement in the planning process. This criticism in part resulted in the formation of a city-wide Atlanta Jewish Youth Council (as described below), a leadership body consisting of representatives of all Jewish youth organizations. This group played a more substantial role in the following year's family concert.

A second problem was a small deficit. This was resolved by organizational donations and subsequent program profits. To prevent any future budgetary problems, a small organizational fee was established shortly thereafter for each youth group whose workers participate in the Youth Workers Council.

Finally, it was felt that the effort expended on the festival made it impractical as an annual event. However, the success of the first festival warranted repetition. The

decision was, therefore, made to hold the Jewish Youth Festival biennially, with the family concert as an annual event.

3. *Youth Council*

An outgrowth of the Youth Workers Council is the Youth Council, with teenage leaders representing every youth group in the city. The Youth Council meets on a regular basis, staffed by a member of A.J.Y.W.C. The Jewish Community Center has assisted with secretarial help and professional supervision. The responsibilities of the Youth Council were defined as follows:

A. To coordinate community-wide interest in youth activities and to develop specific programs for the entire community.

B. To maintain and strengthen Jewish identity among Atlanta's young people.

C. To develop mailings/brochures regarding Atlanta's youth groups, programs to Israel, educational opportunities, colleges, and so forth.

D. To serve as a clearing house for resources, community calendar, and referral.

E. To support and participate in community-wide programs (Soviet Jewry Rally, Walk for Israel, Yom Hashoah commemoration).

F. To promote and develop projects such as Shalom Atlanta, leadership training, Federation campaign, and so forth.

As of this writing, the Youth Council has completed its first year of activity. It has served as a clearing house for community youth programming and has determined

an agenda for future activity including a resource bank and community calendar. Further development of the Council will proceed slowly, due to the lack of a paid professional worker. Nonetheless, this Council has established itself as an integral part of the Atlanta community.

Conclusion

The Youth Workers Council has had remarkable success in a few short years, and yet, has much room for future growth. We have found that the leadership of the Council often lacks ample time to achieve the Council's objectives. In addition, attendance fluctuates from meeting to meeting due to busy schedules and time conflicts. We have also found that those institutions whose youth staffs consist primarily of volunteers are generally less consistent in their involvement in the Youth Workers Council. Despite these obvious drawbacks, community support of the Council is extensive, and the full commitment of a small core of professionals has sustained its efforts.

Finally, more important than the program successes and tangible accomplishments of the Council has been the camaraderie which has developed over the years. Jewish communal workers and rabbis, all concerned with the quality of Jewish life for Atlanta's teenagers, have united with a singleness of purpose. The result has been an atmosphere of close cooperation among professionals, better programming, and improved attitudes within Atlanta's lay and professional communal structure.