

# ON BUILDING COALITIONS: ONE AGENCY'S PERSPECTIVE

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With the onset of federal and local budget balancing restrictions and the inability of private philanthropy to compensate fully for lost public dollars, social service organizations across the country have had to stretch in new and creative ways in order to meet the growing needs of their constituents. This article presents one family service agency's efforts to coalition-building in response to this challenge.

Five years prior to this writing, the Jewish Family Services of Baltimore belonged to almost no coalitions at all: we were a fairly isolated, free-standing entity that functioned as a change agent for Jewish families and individuals, but seldom on a broader, community scale. We made the decision to emerge from our cocoon for two major reasons:

- First, this was part of an overall strategic plan. Based on the turn-of-the-century Jewish activist tradition stemming from Eastern Europe, we know that one way to make life better for Jews is to make life better for everyone. This philosophical approach, originating in the wisdom of

the Prophets, flows through Jewish history. Particularly in the current political climate that threatens the very fabric of our social welfare system, we need to join our non-Jewish brothers and sisters to make a difference.

- Second, each one of our own lives (and the life of each of our clients) is inextricably bound up with government policy and politics. Perhaps the most obvious examples are the Jewish poor, the retarded, physically disabled, mentally ill, and frail elderly—those who depend more than most of us on government supports to meet their needs for food, clothing, shelter and medical care. The Jewish community has acute needs in these areas: we are a disproportionately old community (with 14% of us at 65 plus); severe physical disability or mental illness hits an additional two to three percent of us; and at least one percent of us nationally requires assistance due to mental retardation or a disability.

With poverty rates as high as eight percent (depending on the city and statistics used), our communities are all too familiar with the hardships of cold, hunger, and homelessness. Even calculating conservatively and taking overlap into consideration, about one in seven Jews in the United States is vulnerable and heavily dependent on aid. Thus, even from a particularistic perspective, our approach must be a broad-based one: In order to help Jews we must help the

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Based on a presentation at the Conference of Jewish Communal Service Quarterly Meeting, Washington, D.C., December, 1985. Many thanks are owed Ellen Whitman of the Council of Jewish Federation's Washington office for suggesting this talk, and to the staff and board of JFS—Baltimore for furthering our recent efforts at coalition-building.

“other guy”; and by helping the “other guy” we help Jews.

#### GETTING INVOLVED IN COALITIONS

Historically this had not been our own agency’s approach. Perhaps the need was not so apparent, or we were too timid or too preoccupied with the day-to-day management and delivery of services. But increasingly we were being criticized for our isolation by our local community relations council, by our state representatives, board members, and other leaders in the community. Meanwhile, the need for interaction with the public sector grew. As a large agency and a well respected one, we were being called on to do our part in the community.

Once we made the decision to get involved, we had to determine how to go about accomplishing this critical, but still vaguely defined goal. We knew we could not do it alone—we were too inexperienced, too restricted in time and money, and too limited in our focus of service to make any real difference by ourselves.

Coalitions were the answer. We saw several advantages in pursuing this approach:

- First, as every beginning political science and community organization student will explain, there is power in numbers. Coalitions offer impact, clout, and the experience of each member organization to help strengthen its cause.

- Second, as a coalition member, our involvement could not be easily dismissed as a particularistic effort or as some single-interest pressure. Moreover, we could ward off any potential anti-Semitism from those we tried to lobby. This is a very important consideration in some sectors of government and in the corporate world where no one wants to be accused of favoritism.

- Third, in a related theme, coalitions can sometimes get us out of our so-called “sectarian bind.” This is particularly

meaningful to agencies like JFS, whose mission is defined as very sectarian in nature, and where only a very few of our programs serve any non-Jews at all. By working in coalition, however, we can obtain government contracts or foundation grants that specify service to a broader community. Then we carve up the community internally among ourselves—for example, Catholic Charities takes their clients, we take ours, and the non-sectarian family service agency in town takes the rest.

- Fourth, coalitions make good business sense. They take time, but in the long run they can save time and money, as well. In obtaining grants or government contracts, they give us a leading edge—that is, coalitions help convince the funders that they are getting more mileage out of their dollar, making more constituents happy, and covering more territory. Furthermore, they imply a systems approach to service delivery, one that is integrated, comprehensive, and—potentially at least—client-oriented.

- Finally, coalitions can be fun. Perhaps this isn’t a relevant motivation in terms of broader, strategic planning issues, but it makes a difference to those of us who have to pluck away at coalition-building week after week. Coalitions allow us to meet new people, gain new insights, and enter whole new worlds of activity otherwise inaccessible to us.

#### WITH WHOM TO JOIN?

In our experience, coalitions may be comprised of three different types of membership, depending on the focus or goal of the group.

- Coalition partners may be other Jewish organizations and agencies, most likely within your own community, or else on a regional or even national scale. To illustrate on a local level, the family service agency might join with the Jewish Com-

munity Center, vocational rehabilitation agency and board of Jewish education in a special program of outreach and services to Jews with disabilities. Or the family service agency might coalesce with a local Jewish nursing home and Jewish hospital to form a geriatric assessment team, or in the case of children's services, with local day and afternoon schools to provide consultation and early intervention programs. On a national scale this might follow the current efforts by Jewish family service agencies who are banding together in a new network of elder support services designed to provide assessment and monitoring services to frail older people in one community whose family members live in another.

- In conjunction with the broader humanitarian and universalistic goals cited earlier are the coalitions we make with non-Jewish agencies—mostly with those that perform a function similar to our own but within the general community. National agencies like Family Service America, the Child Welfare League, and the National Homearing Council have this approach as their *raison d'être*. In addition, in many states, the local family service agencies have developed their own coalitions, with the executives meeting on a regular basis to exchange ideas and strategies and to engage in joint ventures. In Baltimore we also have a particularly strong city-wide coalition involving the local Catholic Charities, non-sectarian family service agency and ourselves.

- Finally, there are the broad-based coalitions in the community—for the homeless, for welfare reform, for services to the chronically mentally ill. Often, in this last group, the coalitions perform a political lobbying or activist function, rather than offer direct service.

Leadership for a coalition may vary, either on a rotating basis, or else depend on who has the greatest stake in whatever is being discussed.

## COALITION GOALS

The coalition's purpose and the composition of its members are, in fact, very intertwined. Here is a brief typology of three different kinds of coalitions which offer a meaningful role for Jewish communal agencies.

- The first type of coalition, and the one generally involving the most diverse constituency, is for the purpose of political influence. For example, focus may be directed to federal legislation, such as the Graham-Rudman-Hollings budget balancing amendment; to the effects of new or prospective Medicare regulations; or against the growing stance within the Small Business Administration which seeks to exclude non-profit agencies from competing on certain government contracts.

On a local level, one can also focus on the legislative arena and the particular politicians involved, or on the regulatory arena. Our agency, for example, has just been involved via coalition in rewriting Maryland's foster care regulations so as to guarantee a meaningful role for the private, voluntary agencies providing this kind of service.

This was not an esoteric exercise; had we not undertaken this process, and not done it in coalition with other agencies, foster care in Maryland would have fallen almost entirely within the state's Department of Social Services—meaning that Jewish children would likely have been placed in non-Jewish homes, depriving them of any formal connection to the Jewish community.

Working in coalition, too, we are desperately trying to influence the state's procurement system for home care and services to the mentally retarded, which now threatens to bypass the quality services of private, non-profit agencies in preference to the lowest bidder.

With regard to legislative issues, our board also developed a special committee

that meets annually with each of our state and city representatives, writes letters and occasionally testifies in the state capital on behalf of key housing, public assistance, and social service issues.

- If the first motivation for coalition-building is political or community influence, the second is money. Most of the new programs undertaken by our agency in the past years have been with the help of the public dollar—despite the well-publicized limitations under which the government operates. Moreover, both for government and private foundations, we find ourselves in a much more marketable position if we take a coalition approach. For example, last September we won a significant Administration on Aging (federal) service grant that was filtered through the state's Department on Aging and was geared to for-profit companies that work in conjunction with voluntary agencies. Because of our own longstanding relationship with a local for-profit management company that runs five area highrise buildings for the aged, we were in the right place at the right time.

Similarly, we received a grant from Baltimore County to provide programs on domestic violence, co-sponsored by the National Council of Jewish Women, and we have joined forces with Catholic Charities and the local non-sectarian family service agency to provide support services for family caregivers of the frail elderly and disabled. Even without going to outside sources for funding, we find that coalitions often save money, as two or more groups co-sponsoring a community lecture can split the cost of advertising, transportation, and honorarium.

- The third motivation for coalitions has to do with commiseration and support. We often hear that it gets lonely at the top, and executives need to talk to other executives. The same is probably true on a programmatic level within our agencies. Thus, we have encouraged our key staff to get involved with local and even national groups that do similar work:

family life education, specialized information and referral services, volunteer services, adoption, shared living for the aged.

Particularly when talking to out-of-town people, where there is less threat of competition, this is an opportunity to let your hair down, get some helpful hints, and piece yourself back together again to face another day's crises successfully.

In thinking of how to start this kind of coalition, my recommendation is to begin low key with a very loose agenda, and then see what happens. These kinds of groups, when successful, gradually take on a life of their own and can evolve into a tight-knit support network; they can even spin off into a business or political partnership, such as the other types of coalition described above.

#### CAVEATS

Like everything else in life, coalitions also have their negative side. Based on our experience, here are several key caveats to bear in mind in forming coalitions.

- Coalitions are a big up-front investment. They take a lot of time and a lot of staff. This overhead must be calculated before embarking on this approach. Thus, it requires a major commitment by both staff and lay leadership in order to be effective.

- The results are slow in coming, and often not tangible. This is particularly true in coalitions built around political or advocacy goals, or else for support and commiseration. We need to be prepared for this reality; otherwise we will be disappointed.

- Roles and boundaries must be carefully defined. This is particularly important in coalitions involving direct service delivery, that is, those where grant or government monies are involved. Our own preference in these situations is to make the divisions along geographic or sectarian lines, or else by clearly defined functions (who does what). But even more impor-

tantly, a successful coalition contract requires a lot of trust, good working relationships and a decent track record. It is best to start small, with a relatively simple contract and build our way up, eliminating the fuzzy lines and personality conflicts in order to avoid even greater headaches later on.

- Not everyone in a coalition is equally invested in a particular issue. Often it requires the best of diagnostic and group work skills to ferret out what moods, limitations, or underlying concerns affect the coalition or its members at a particular time. Clinical skills are also often useful in moving the group towards its goals and assessing its progress and capabilities. Although coalitions benefit most from a "win-win" situation (in game theory language, where everyone comes out

ahead), the art of compromise is often needed, and individual agency interests sometimes cannot be accommodated by the group as a whole.

- Even with political "tip-toeing" and careful preparations, when push comes to shove, our loyalties are—and must be—with our own agency first. Therefore, it must be understood from the start that each coalition has its limitations. Coalitions are not for everything and not for everyone. They should be carefully selected, thought through, and only then pursued.

Taking these caveats into account, we can nevertheless turn to the first commandment in the Bible as our watchword: Be fruitful and multiply—and via coalitions, wherever possible.



## ANNUAL MEETING



*Conference of  
Jewish Communal Service*

**May 25–28, 1987**

*Concord Hotel  
Kiamesha Lake, New York*