

JERUSALEM LETTER

Jerusalem Center for Public Affairs

JL:100 3 Adar 5748 / 21 February 1988

THE AMERICAN JEWISH COMMUNITY TURNS TO THE STATES: THE SPRINGFIELD OFFICE OF THE JEWISH FEDERATIONS OF ILLINOIS

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The Jewish Community Discovers the State

One of the most pronounced characteristics of the American Jewish community until recently was its almost exclusive focus on the federal government in its pursuit of its domestic interests. There are good historical reasons for this. The vast majority of the Eastern European Jews who founded the present American Jewish community settled in big cities at a time when the big cities were beginning to bypass their states and turn directly to Washington for assistance. These Jewish immigrants and their children came of age during the period from the New Deal to the Great Society when Washington seemed to be the appropriate address for dealing with all

social issues. Like most other Americans whose ties were in the big cities, the Jews simply ignored the states, stereotyping them as antiquarian relics at best and obstacles to progress at worst.

Then in the 1970s in the wake of the failures of the Great Society, it began to become apparent to Americans that the federal government's reach had exceeded its grasp, that no matter how important Washington was, it could not be all-important. This view was abetted by the changing settlement patterns in the United States. The big cities declined in importance as more and more Americans, including American Jews, settled first in suburbs and then in exurbs which, whatever their proximity to the old metropolis, were

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independent political jurisdictions that had to make their own arrangements to serve their residents. At the same time the states were completing a thirty-year period of modernization and internal reform that made them once again vehicles of energetic and progressive government. By the time Ronald Reagan became President of the United States with his program of drastic federal cutbacks, the states were almost the only governments in a position to act to confront those problems which required governmental response beyond the local arena.

In 1981, the Jewish Federation of Metropolitan Chicago decided that the time had come to address local and domestic concerns in an organized manner by establishing a presence in Illinois' state capital, Springfield, with the full backing and support of the other Jewish community federations in the state.

Opening an Office in the State Capital

Actually, according to Federation Assistant Executive Director Joel M. Carp, who took charge of the project from its inception, "We were decades late. Few people realized it, but most authority had already been transferred from the federal government to the states." This shift, coupled with the overall decline in government funding for social programs, accelerated the need for the Federation to protect the interests and needs of the Jews and non-Jews its agencies serve.

Thus, in January 1981, the Federation issued a proposal outlining plans and rationale for establishing a Government Affairs Office in Springfield. Although it was not the first community to pursue such a plan, Chicago was still breaking new ground. The proposal defined the project's key goals as: "Development of relationships with key legislators, testimony on matters of importance to the Jewish community, assistance in securing of additional public funds, and attempts to develop and introduce legislation of interest to the Jewish community."

Until the Springfield office was estab-

lished, Chicago's Federation leaders had assumed that they did a good job in securing public funding for programs such as its Council for Jewish Elderly and Jewish Vocational Service. The idea of establishing an active presence in the seat of state government was supported by Jewish members of the Illinois General Assembly, who apparently had a different view of the situation. They believed that, with their guidance, the new office could become a tool for procuring increasing sums of public money for Jewish community programs.

These senators and representatives proved very helpful in the initial stages of setting up operations. They assisted the Federation people in everything from choosing office space to hiring lobbyists and developing a thorough understanding of the political environment in which the Government Affairs Office would operate. In short, they provided the Federation with the tools and basic know-how required to establish an effective presence in the seat of state government. The strong early support of the Federation's top lay leaders and its executive vice president, Steven B. Nasatir, served as a solid foundation from which necessary risks could be taken as the Federation entered a new arena.

Existing good relations with other religious and nonprofit groups was another boon. Everyone from Catholic lobbyists to representatives of the YMCAs was consulted. Many of these organizations had long been represented in Springfield, and could lend the hand of experience to the Federation.

But the Federation had a major advantage on its side. Whereas many other groups, such as Catholic and Lutheran social service organizations, rely on government funding for a large proportion of their operating budgets, none of the Jewish community's programs depend on government monies for the core of their operating revenue. (The greatest dependency situation exists in long-term care facilities, where 40 percent of fees are paid by government agencies.)

Thus, Federation agencies use government funding to enhance and expand services which already receive basic funding from the community's own resources, not to fill basic holes. This lack of dependency enabled the Government Affairs Office to pursue broad policy goals from the outset, rather than focus all efforts on securing a share of the ever-shrinking pool of public monies.

Focusing on Human Services

What sort of state issues matter to the Illinois Jewish community as represented by the Jewish Federation? Judging by the efforts of the two full-time lobbyists in Springfield, every major human services issue falls within the parameters of the community's interests. Topics such as child welfare, sheltering the homeless, mental health services and caring for the state's aging population get a large share of attention.

The Federation's relative financial independence provides its lobbyists with a high level of credibility; their every move is not scrutinized for possible ulterior motives, and it is widely assumed that they are motivated by a sincere desire to improve the structure of social welfare programs for all Illinois residents.

The Springfield Government Affairs Office is actually a joint effort of the Jewish Federation of Metropolitan Chicago and the other Illinois Jewish community federations, including the Peoria, Rockford, Springfield, Quad Cities, and the Southern and Central Illinois Federations. Thus, the office takes care to support legislation and policies that will benefit all of those communities.

Opening a Washington Office

After its Springfield office was a proven success, Chicago's Federation leaders began to look to Washington as another important center of operations. Originally, they worked with and through the Washington Action Office of the Council of Jewish Federations, which lobbies on behalf of the nearly 200

federations across the U.S. In 1986, the Chicago Federation opened its own office there, where it pursues a strategy similar to that pursued in Springfield.

The office's work in the area of housing serves as a good example: The Reagan administration brought with it a sharp reduction in the amount of federal money being allocated to subsidized housing for the elderly. While a good thorough proposal that proved real need and demonstrated an organization's ability to manage such a project satisfactorily used to go a long way toward assuring funding, this is no longer the case. With many organizations in countless communities competing for a share of a shrinking pie, connections and reputations play an increasingly central role in determining the fate of public housing programs. For example, a major share of construction and rent subsidy funds for housing for the elderly is allocated at the personal discretion of the Secretary of Housing and Urban Development (HUD). In such a situation, access to the Secretary and a good reputation in that individual's eyes play a central role in winning approval for projects.

Chicago's Council for Jewish Elderly, an agency of the Jewish Federation, recently received \$2.3 million from HUD for the construction of a new 48-unit senior housing project, something which might not have happened without the active support of key Federation lay leaders and the untiring efforts of the Federation's full-time Washington lobbyist. The Springfield connections help in the national arena, too. Illinois' governor recently telephoned the HUD Secretary personally to request that a 50-unit housing project operated by the Council for Jewish Elderly be converted from one funding status to another. The request was granted, thereby freeing up \$30,000 of Jewish community funds in the Council of Jewish Elderly's budget which can be used to expand other services to the elderly each year.

Also on the national plane, the Federation keeps a close watch on developments

affecting welfare and other family support programs. Recent bills designed to revamp the Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC) program have received the support of the Washington office.

A Growing Reputation for Independent Expertise

Understandably, the Federation has achieved greater prominence in Illinois political circles than in Washington. In Illinois, the Springfield lobbyists have achieved a name for themselves and their organization -- a name that garners respect. With increasing frequency, state officials turn to Federation officials for counseling on issues related to social welfare and human services issues.

As one of many examples, Federation staffers were recently called in to mediate a dispute that had developed between the state and several voluntary organizations working on child welfare issues. The Federation was regarded as an honest broker by all involved parties. As previously noted, the lack of dependence on federal funding enhances Federation's status as a source of unbiased expertise.

When the Illinois governor proposed a new state budget that included cuts in education, child welfare, rehabilitation and aging services, the Government Affairs office wrote, "The Jewish Federation cannot support the mix of revenue proposals and appropriations initially proposed...The Government Affairs Committee will be considering a framework for a policy position that includes a review of the proposed sources of revenue, equity of distribution, and the vulnerability of current human services at existing tax levels." Clearly, the careful, thoughtful approach has made the Federations' body a force to be reckoned with.

A Proven Investment

The budget for staffing and operating offices in Springfield and Washington (lobbying in the municipal arena is handled directly by Federation staff in Chicago) is approximately \$250,000 per year. From a

purely financial perspective, such victories as the \$2.3 million grant from HUD are just one example of a portion of the \$13 million received by Federation agencies (not including hospitals) annually from government sources. At a time when public funds are on the decline and most public service organizations are scrambling to survive with less funding, Chicago's Federation-affiliated agencies actually are enjoying an upsurge in state and federal financial support. In 1986, the increase totaled 16 percent over the previous year. Thus, the facts speak for themselves: a true desire to improve social services for everyone, coupled with willingness to share expertise with whoever needs it, can yield impressive economic benefits for organizations such as the Federation.

The justification for engaging in political lobbying activities clearly goes beyond the financial sphere. Other factors range from the development of connections and relationships with policy-makers on every plane of government to publicizing the Jewish community's positions on social welfare issues, to fostering a collective involvement in the realities of day-to-day life in the communities where Jews live.

The efforts are not handled solely by professional lobbyists. Backing up the professional effort is a committee made up of representatives of all of the federations which jointly sponsor the Springfield Government Affairs Office, and professionals from the Chicago Federation and its affiliated agencies. This group helps set policy goals and determines which issues are of central importance. Additionally, volunteer leaders with valuable political contacts and influence related to specific issues are called upon whenever their particular area of expertise is needed.

Traditionally, American Jews have constituted an important bloc in American politics despite their small numbers, because they vote in far greater proportion than any other group. This high level of participation encourages politicians to work closely with Jews in their districts. Other attractions include the perception that the

Jews tend to avoid extremism, refrain from "going to the edge" on every issue, and are substantial givers to political causes. These attributes have served the Jews well in Washington for several decades in their lobbying on behalf of Israel, Soviet Jewry and other "Jewish" issues. The activism in these spheres cannot be separated from the success enjoyed in more recent lobbying related to domestic and local issues.

In mid-1985, the Federation's Joel Carp escorted a delegation of Illinois state political leaders on a visit to Israel. The group, which included the Speaker of the House and the President of the Senate, received a firsthand view of Israel's security situation and met with leading political figures. The deeper understanding of the Jewish collective experience which this trip yielded has already been helpful in gaining access to people who play key roles in state lawmaking and in choosing the people who will run for the U.S. Congress from Illinois districts.

Building Coalitions

Over the years, Jewish groups have experienced shifting relations with other minority groups in America. The historic black-Jewish alliance, for instance, suffered greatly after 1967. Hence, coalition-building is a major goal of the Illinois Jewish Federations' lobbying efforts, and an area in which it has enjoyed much success.

The Federations pursue coalition partners only when other groups share the goals sought by Illinois Jews. In other words, the values and goals of the Jewish community cannot be compromised in pursuit of a joint platform with other groups or communities. When this convergence occurs -- as it does with great frequency in the realm of human services issues that occupy such a large share of the Government Affairs Program's agenda -- coalitions are forged with representatives of every major ethnic and religious group.

In the very first year of the Government Affairs Office's operations, the

Governor of Illinois was set to eliminate a human services program which was of great importance to the Federations and many other groups. The Governor vetoed the bill in question, but intensive lobbying efforts by a broad-based coalition of organizations led to a 100 percent vote to override the veto in the state House of Representatives. The program survived, and a pattern had been set for future cooperation.

This interest in working with other groups has served the Chicago Federation well in its lobbying efforts with the City of Chicago. In the years since Harold Washington became Chicago's first black mayor, many Jews have worried about a further deterioration in black-Jewish relations, but the Federation has maintained close ties with Washington and his administration. Joel Carp co-chaired the Mayor's Task Force on Hunger, which in late 1984 issued a landmark report defining the scope of undernourishment and malnourishment in Chicago. Although hunger is not traditionally thought of as a Jewish problem, the Federation played a major role in studying the situation and putting forth recommendations to remedy the serious situation.

Hunger is only one of many issues which the Federation has broached through its lobbying and community involvement activities, but it serves as an excellent example of the positive role that Jewish communal organizations can play in shaping the future nature of the general community of which Jews are a part. Efforts such as that undertaken in Chicago represent an important step in the increasingly active political participation of American Jews in all of the governmental areas that deal with their concerns.

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