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Heart of NJ Jewish Leaders Describe How Jewish Agencies Are Cooperating to Help Ukraine

By Debra Rubin | April 07, 2022

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As thousands of Jews and other Ukrainians flee their country as the Russian invasion destroys their homes and institutions, Jewish agencies that have long assisted the community, providing cultural and religious life and safety when necessary, have sprung into action.

Those agencies, particularly the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee (JDC) and Jewish Agency for Israel (JAFI), have been buoyed by support from the Jewish Federations of North America (JFNA). They are providing chesed centers, hotlines, safe spaces for refugees and transport to Israel for those looking to make aliyah.

In a virtual program sponsored by the Jewish Federation in the Heart of New Jersey on April 4, federation and agency leaders outlined the broad array of services being provided in the ongoing crisis.

“Prior to the invasion, Ukraine had one of the largest and most vibrant Jewish communities in Europe,” said Elisheva Massel, JDC director of strategic partnerships. “For the past 30 years we’ve been working with our federation partners, focusing on saving and rebuilding Jewish lives.”

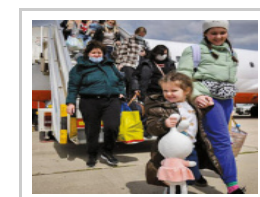
As of April 4, the Jewish Federations of North America had taken in \$35 million for its Ukrainian relief fund.

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Federation
Overseas and
Israel Chair
Phyliss Chancy
Solomon said the
reason the
partner agencies
of the federation
were able to
respond so
quickly on
February 24, the
day the invasion
began, was because “they were there February 22 and 23.”

“You don’t build a firehouse once the fire breaks out,” she added.

The local federation has taken in \$150,000 for Ukraine and is now focusing on its annual campaign to be able to provide ongoing support, said Dan Rozett, federation director of community relations and Israel engagement.

Rabbi Bennett Miller, rabbi emeritus at Anshe Emeth Memorial Temple in New Brunswick and a board member of JAFI, said he had been to Ukraine several times since the breakup of the former Soviet Union.

On his first trip soon after Ukraine gained its freedom, Rabbi Miller said, “I saw with my own eyes these communities were desperately poor and needed help.”

“Ten years later you could see a renewal,” he noted, adding the resurgence included synagogues, chesed centers and Hebrew classes for those looking to make aliyah.

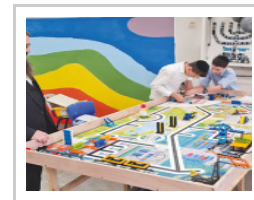
One of the most enduring symbols of that revival for Ukraine’s 200,000 Jews could literally be seen on buildings. “Under the communists wherever there was Jewish part of town the communists painted over the buildings because the signs were in Yiddish,” he recalled. “When the communists left, the paint started to chip away and I saw with my own eyes the Jewish quarters come alive.”

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Rabbi Miller is former chair of the national rabbinic cabinet of JFNA and former national chair of ARZA, the Zionist arm of the Reform movement. He credited the work and cooperation of the larger Jewish community including all streams of Judaism, Chabad, HIAS, ORT, JDC and JAFI, as well as the Ukrainian and Israeli governments, for helping to lift the community and establish ties and a system that allowed them to quickly respond to the humanitarian crisis.

“Thank God for the Jewish institutions; we have to be on the ground within 24 hours,” said Rabbi Miller. “I can’t tell you how proud I am to be part of all that. Without these organizations existing in quiet times there would be a disastrous situation. Instead we have stories of great heroism.”

Among the lifesaving initiatives launched by the JDC has been the shipment of 165 tons of humanitarian aid, including food, medicine, soap and other crucial supplies to Jews sheltering in Ukraine and those who have fled to Moldova, said Massel. Even before the invasion, 75,000 of Ukraine’s Jews accessed one of the JDC’s services.

JDC had provided aid to nearly 40,000 poor Jewish elderly, including 9,900 Holocaust survivors, and needy families in 1,000 locations around Ukraine. It has operated 18 chesed centers, six flagship JCCs with 3,000 Jewish community volunteers and thousands more paid Ukrainian home healthcare workers.

Since the invasion began the JDC has pivoted to provide 30,000 refugees with vital necessities, like food, medicine and psychosocial aid as they crossed from Ukraine into Romania, Moldova, Poland and Hungary. Their needs are also being taken care of at care centers once they arrive.

Two emergency hotlines for incoming calls from Ukraine, one for general Jewish community needs and another specifically for evacuation information—which is staffed by Israelis who are Russian or Ukrainian speakers—have been established. “A woman called the hotline, which sent her call to an Israeli Russian speaker,” said Massel. “She was a new mother and needed baby formula. Within two hours someone was at her door with baby formula.”

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Additional emergency hotlines are now operated by JDC's local community partners in Estonia, Hungary, Latvia, Poland, Romania and Slovakia to answer questions and direct individuals looking to learn more about where they can go and what support they can receive in these communities.

Both Rabbi Miller and Massel said JDC and JAFI are working in close cooperation to assist refugees who want to make aliyah. However, both agreed the majority of Ukraine's fleeing Jews prefer to return to their homeland once the war ends.

About 21,000 Jews have arrived in Israel, but about 10,000 are Jewish only by Hitler's Nuremberg laws.

Rabbi Miller also said he had been on a call with JFNA earlier that day and Jewish federations across the country have been told to prepare for the arrival of Ukrainian refugees. He said JNFA will also need additional funds to rebuild the institutions and infrastructure for those returning to Ukraine.

"We will do it because we don't have a choice," said Rabbi Miller. "If we don't act and continue to act, these communities will not be reestablished and the Jews there will be lost. Right now we are paying the mortgage for the Jews of Europe and the Jewish communities of Ukraine where many of us came from."

By Debra Rubin

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