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Jewish Child & Family Services and Synagogue Federation Commission (JUF) Recipients of Spertus Institute for Jewish Learning and Leadership 2016 Innovation and Collaboration Award

Jewish Child & Family Services (JCFS) and Synagogue Federation Commission (JUF) are recipients of the 2016 Innovation and Collaboration Award for their Synagogue Inclusion Education and Engagement Project, a recently completed year-long study whose goal is to build a more inclusive Jewish community for persons with disabilities and their families by addressing barriers to participation in synagogue life.

Funded by a JUF Breakthrough Grant and administered by JUF's Synagogue Federation Commission in partnership with Encompass of JCFS, the Chicago Synagogue Inclusion Project found that synagogues across Chicagoland are in different stages of readiness and are in major need of education and training, developing strong networks, identifying "champions" of inclusion, and utilizing outside resources before they are able to move closer to inclusion.

"Ultimately, the goal is to use the research to develop tools and strategies for identifying the resources, mechanisms, and structures that would best foster a synagogue's ability and readiness to facilitate inclusion for the long-term," said Tracy More, associate vice president of Community Outreach and Engagement of the Jewish United Fund/Jewish Federation of Metropolitan Chicago.

"The process of engaging with synagogues so broadly was unique. The approach was innovative because it engaged the full geographical and denominational spectrum of the Jewish community through one process of collective learning, coordinated study and strategic development in the complex synagogue space," said continued More.

The Synagogue Inclusion Education and Engagement Project also found that:

- 1) Households touched by a disability report feeling invisible, left out or perceived as disruptive
- 2) Congregations don't always know who has disabilities
- 3) Perceptions of inclusion impacts synagogue membership
- 4) Synagogue leaders rate inclusion efforts higher than household respondents
- 5) Synagogues are inconsistent and ad-hoc in their approach and ability to be inclusive of individuals with disabilities and their families
- 6) All synagogues state that they share inclusion as a value, and momentum exists to move these efforts forward, yet many do not know where and how to begin.

Almost 1,500 households, representing all areas of Metropolitan Chicago, responded to the survey. Fifty-six percent of households were synagogue members, with 30% of households having a person with a disability, half of whom between ages 23-64. Fifty synagogues responded to the survey, eight of which were Orthodox. All synagogues identify including children with disabilities and the elderly with physical disabilities as priorities.

Twenty percent of the population (including the Jewish population) has some kind of disability (whether cognitive, emotional or physical). The majority of Jews with disabilities do not participate in synagogue life because many congregations do not have an effective inclusion approach. This barrier to participation also prevents congregations benefiting from the unique contributions of these potential members.

“Raising the issue across the community through individual conversations and basing all decision making on good data will lead to a much better knowledge of who is in need of services in the community and where there are gaps in a synagogue’s ability to include people with disabilities,” said Ed Frim, the nationally recognized inclusion and outreach specialist engage to consult on this effort.

“The fact is, those with disabilities have a right to contribute and they have an ability to contribute and be part of the community. Inclusion is a huge opportunity for people with disabilities to enrich congregations and for congregations to help them realize their potential,” said Frim.

Spertus Institute is a center for Jewish learning and leadership that invites people of all backgrounds to explore the multifaceted Jewish experience. Spertus Institute inspires learning, serves diverse communities, and fosters understanding of Jews and people of all faiths.

Jewish Child & Family Services provides vital, individualized, results-driven, therapeutic and supportive services for thousands of children, adults and families of all backgrounds each year, facing challenges with life transitions, mental health, developmental/intellectual disability and basic human need.

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