

## Jewish Community Relations Initiative

**The Background:** The Jewish community's presence and voice in the larger Phoenix community has diminished over the last two decades. Although the Jewish community has grown from around 80,000 to an estimated 100,000, it has dropped as a percentage of the metropolitan community, and we are now a very small percentage of the larger community. These numbers are rough, as there has not been a demographic study since 2002.

Over that same period of time, the Phoenix Jewish Community has grown to 50 congregations, 10 agencies and scores of organizations. Our population has scattered itself geographically throughout a much larger built-out metropolitan area, and "we," meaning Jewish activists both within the Jewish community and in the broader community, are now less cohesive as a group, less well-known than we once were – inside and outside our community.

Until a few years ago, we had a formal voice, the Community Relations Council, to speak out on Jewish issues or issues important to the Jewish community, such as human rights, cultural and religious traditions and values, poverty, hunger, the environment, intergroup relations, and of course, providing accurate information about Israel. Today no single organizational "voice" speaks for Jewish issues. We do have a few organizations who speak out, but only when the issue falls within their mission, e.g. ADL, AIPAC, AJC, etc.

Additionally, and perhaps equally important, our community is assimilating. Although there are still many Jewish activists and business people involved in the larger community, they are less likely to pointedly identify themselves as Jewish in those circles. In fact, many Jews who are active and well-known in the larger community are minimally or not at all active in the organized Jewish community. Preservation of our community in part requires that the Jewish community become more aware of its own inherent value and power – something we can promote through the amplification of a communal Jewish voice.

**The Project:** A Founding Work Group is being formed to launch a Jewish Community Relations Initiative with the following vision:

*To foster dialogue and understanding within the Jewish and larger metropolitan communities, to amplify the Jewish voice within and outside of the Jewish community in response to matters of importance to the Jewish people and on issues that inherently cry out for a Jewish response, to facilitate collaborations for good among Jews and between the Jewish community and its neighbors.*

How this vision unfolds will depend on the decisions of the Founding Work Group (FWG), which will effectively be the JCRI's first board of directors. The vision requires that the FWG also seek input from and collaboration with members of the Jewish community and eventually partners outside the Jewish community.

**Project History:** This project is an outgrowth of a Jewish Community Conversation hosted by the Jewish Community Foundation in 2011, which spawned a public affairs workgroup. The workgroup identified a need to rebirth an organization to undertake the outreach and communications functions of the old Jewish Community Relations Council, but also envisioned a modern, technologically innovative operation reflecting the diversity of our community, yet still nimble enough to respond to current events. The Board of Rabbis, funded by a generous grant from the Jewish Community Foundation, agreed to oversee the rebirth and hired two consultants to facilitate this effort. The consultants conducted a "listening tour" to gather information about community needs, and to research into best practices in other communities.

Next, a Core Team of eight community members representing the diversity of the community was formed to hire the JCRI's first executive director, and to identify the initial members of a founding workgroup to take the effort to the next level. That's where we are right now. The next work will include reviewing research about other JCRCs doing similar work in other communities, structuring the organization to respond to the input of the community, including developing a communication and civil dialoguing process, identifying collaborative and funding partners, designing the entity's priorities and programs and finally, launching the work itself.

**The Grant:** This project is made possible by a generous grant from the Jewish Community Foundation. The JCF's investment is the largest one-time grant it has ever made and its generous support will allow for the planning, strategy, meetings and development efforts to unfold over the coming year. The work has also received a generous three year award, again through the auspices of the JCF, from the Blank family trust.

**The Facilitators:** The consultants are Dr. Sandra Price, Ph.D., JD, and Rhonda Bannard. Dr. Price is a former public affairs attorney with extensive experience in community development, nonprofit organizational capacity building, dispute resolution and ethics. She is currently on the faculty at Arizona State University's School of Community and Resource Development. Ms. Bannard is the founder of Inspired Connections, a consulting firm serving nonprofit, corporate and small business clients in the areas of community relations, strategic planning, fund development, marketing, PR, and event planning, among other services.

**The Participants:** We began our "listening tour" by speaking with individuals identified because, as a group, they represent the diverse range of interests and perspectives within our Jewish community. These initial interviews yielded a rich perspective on the project, as well as a large list of additional entities and individuals who they believe could be instrumental in launching the project. The second phase of the research invited over 200 individuals whose names were provided by the interviewees to give us feedback. In the third phase, we are asking all members of the Jewish community to use a new web portal to tell us what you think, what you're interested in, how you'd like to be involved. Eventually, as this organization takes shape, also reach out to potential partners outside the Jewish community.

**The Challenge:** We undertake this work knowing that the Phoenix Jewish community is diverse and often speaks with multiple voices, reflecting the characteristics of the secular community at large. Nevertheless, there are times when distinctly Jewish values must be amplified into the larger communal conversation. It is our intention to invite the larger community to engage in the effort, and ask for patience as we work toward a model that retains the diverse flavor of our community while enabling us to find consensus where we can for the common good. We are fortunate in that several other U.S. Jewish communities have achieved success in this regard, and can offer some guidance, and also that one of our facilitators, Dr. Price, has expertise in facilitation and conflict management.

**Why Now?** If not now, then when? The Jewish holiday of *Rosh Hashanah* is upon us, and this feels like a propitious time for new beginnings. We invite you to join us for this important initiative to unite our community around shared issues and concerns, and believe together this effort can strengthen the vitality of the entire Jewish community.