

GEO Member Story



For more than a century, Jewish community federations have existed in North American cities as a means of consolidating giving to address the most pressing needs of Jewish communities. Over time, the needs of these communities have varied — ranging from stemming desperate poverty and hunger, addressing human rights issues, building communal institutions, meeting emergencies, and supporting Jewish culture and religious life. The federation system as a whole has grown and adapted in order to meet those changing needs. In the years since their beginnings, the number of federations has grown to about 130 in total, collectively giving about \$3 billion annually.

Operating with a distinctive set of giving traditions and practices, these federations are now facing trends and disruptions that present both challenges and opportunities.

Among North America's federations is the **Jewish Community Federation of San Francisco, the Peninsula, Marin and Sonoma Counties**, which is helping to lead by example in taking innovative approaches to its giving, fundraising, and community engagement activities.

Adin Miller, senior director of community impact and innovations at the federation, says that while the federation system is still as vital as ever, there are new challenges: namely, major shifts in Jewish communal identity and an increase in donors who prefer to do their own research and giving independent of a federation.

“This has in many ways challenged the idea of a centralized organization that receives financial resources and makes decisions to benefit the community as a whole. In turn, that has reshaped the roles we play in the Jewish community and elevated our work to bring about systemic change by targeting gaps in services and unmet needs,” Miller said.

Referencing research, including Jumpstart's [Connected to Give studies](#), Miller said that while Jewish society as a whole remains highly-charitable, the focus of its giving is moving away from Jewish philanthropies and charities — a particular challenge for federations and their traditional models.

To address this challenge, the federation has reasserted its mission to look out for the welfare of the whole community and identify and address unmet needs. And, unlike other local Jewish organizations, it has elevated the scale by which it engages new generations of donors in community building and philanthropy. One specific response from the federation to this shift was the introduction of the [Impact Grants Initiative](#), which is based on social venture philanthropy. The IGI has helped engage donors, and Miller said he hopes he'll be able to use the experience to help other federations interested in adopting a similar approach.

“We are using it as a tool to reengage people who were no longer engaged with the organization and to attract new donors to be interested in the organization, because we gave them an experience that was really hands-on, teaching them both philanthropic practices and working on strategic grant decisions,” Miller said.

Miller said the federation is also working on a community index study to assess the vitality of the Jewish community in its geographic area, with a set of benchmarks and indicators to better understand the community's characteristics and to identify opportunities and gaps that the federation and other Jewish organizations in the community can incorporate in their engagement and funding strategies.

The project borrows from models like the [Silicon Valley Index](#) and seeks to help the federation get a better grasp of how it can take steps to improve the community, Miller said. While the index is solely an

effort of this particular federation right now, Miller said he hopes it will spread to other federations in the future.

Additionally, the federation has made helpful adjustments in the terminology it uses, with the new terminology bearing more resemblance to contemporary, secular grantmaking. Examples of these adjustments include updating the terms “allocations” and “beneficiary agencies” to “grants” and “grantees,” respectively. Likewise, the federation made a significant shift to restructure its relationship with its grantees to focus on shared priorities and partnerships. While this may initially seem like a small step, it’s significant in its usefulness to the federation’s efforts to use a more strategic approach in its giving, Miller said.

The federation’s increased efforts to help its grantees practice effective evaluation has helped strengthen both the federation and grantees. Grantees are learning to better understand the communities they’re serving, and they’re learning to make important distinctions between outcomes and outputs, Miller said. Grantees are now more likely to measure and meaningfully share with the federation about their efforts, meaning that grant dollars are going farther and grantees are becoming more successful. These changes also allow the federation itself to display to donors the thoughtfulness that goes into the federation’s giving.

Miller also shared about some of the unique advantages that come with federations’ giving traditions, such as the advantage of having a history of giving unrestricted support. Additionally, the structure of federations in North America helps position them as natural fits for collective impact work and organizing around systems-level change. If federations could take on a more collective approach to their giving, Miller said it could reduce burdens on the organizations they support, since federation collaboration could potentially reduce the need for multiple funding appeals to multiple federations and instead allow for organizations to apply for funding to a collective group.

Federations are also well-positioned to be teachers for the rest of the field of philanthropy about how to go about doing community participatory grantmaking, Miller said, adding that, when making funding decisions, every single federation uses at least a handful of different committees made up of donors and community members.

Miller encouraged both Jewish federations and secular foundations to break out of their separate worlds and be able to share approaches with each other — and to work around common issues together, giving the example of anticipating and dealing with the demands of the Bay Area’s elderly population. Miller said that his “call to action” would be for both federations and other philanthropic organizations to look at how they can collaborate around big, looming issues together.

For more information about the Jewish Community Federation of San Francisco, the Peninsula, Marin and Sonoma Counties, visit www.jewishfed.org.

GEO resources that relate to the topics covered in this member spotlight

Cracking the Network Code



Building Community Capacity for Participation in Evaluation



Widespread Empathy

