

# **Leadership Profile: Judith Bernstein-Baker, Retired Executive Director for the Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society (HIAS) of Pennsylvania**

Meredith Chang 13 September 2017

The Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society of Pennsylvania (HIAS PA) is a Philadelphia nonprofit that provides "legal and supportive services to immigrants, refugees, and asylum seekers" and "advocates for just and inclusive immigration policy and practices." Originally founded by the Philadelphia Jewish community in 1882 to assist Jewish refugees fleeing Russian pogroms, HIAS PA now serves immigrants and refugees of all religious and ethnic backgrounds. Its values are "based on the core Jewish belief of 'welcoming the stranger' and tzedakah (generosity, charity, and fairness)." The organization estimates it has assisted more than 300,000 people from over one hundred countries during its lengthy history.

Judith Bernstein-Baker served as HIAS PA Executive Director until October 2016, retiring after leading the organization for eighteen years. Her involvement with

HIAS PA began while running the Public Service Program at the University of Pennsylvania Law School, which placed students with HIAS PA to fulfill the school's requirement for students to perform public service. Judi became particularly interested in immigration issues in 1996, when U.S. law took a harsher stance on immigration and she "began getting calls from law students who graduated, asking me if I could help find pro bono attorneys to help handle cases around the country for immigrants." Around this time, the position of HIAS PA executive director became open, and Judi was asked to apply. "After some soul-searching as to whether I should leave Penn, I decided I would leave and get back into the so-called front lines." Judi also was drawn to HIAS because of a strong personal connection: the national organization had brought her mother to the United States. "If it wasn't for HIAS, we wouldn't be here."

## **Leading organizational transformation**

"When I arrived at HIAS, it was a very small organization and had very fairly narrow parameters as to what it should do." As one of three agencies in the Jewish communal network that handled refugees, HIAS PA focused on helping to navigate the immigration system and attain citizenship. This included pre-migration counseling, assistance applying for green cards, and provision of community education, among other services. "Once they arrived, we'd turn them over to other agencies for social

services and job placement."

With only eight staff to address the needs of an estimated four to five hundred refugees inbound to Philadelphia per year, Judi began looking for ways to expand both HIAS PA and its services. "We...started a legal services component after [The Illegal Immigration Reform and Immigrant Responsibility Act of 1996]

was passed. ...When I arrived, we had one part-time lawyer and one full-time lawyer." Judi's experiences at Penn provided the foundation for expansion. "Because I had both legal and social work backgrounds...I started working to build up that program."

At the beginning of Judi's tenure at HIAS PA, the organization was heavily reliant on the Jewish Federation for funds. "I think we had one outside grant. We did one fundraiser a year. And I guess sixty to seventy percent of our money came from the Jewish Federation." The expansion of the legal program enabled HIAS PA to grow its grant base, which Judi attributes to her connections to the legal community and to the excellent reputation of the HIAS PA staff. But an extraordinary need to rapidly develop new sources of funding soon emerged. "As the demographics of refugees changed, the Jewish Federation felt it was no longer a priority for them to fund...and when I say demographics, I mean less Jews. And because they didn't provide their generous subsidy, the two other agencies...made a decision not to

participate in the refugee program. So we had to make a decision as to whether or not to take over their functions, and we had to do so with very diminished funds." After years of receiving one hundred thousand dollars annually from the Jewish Federation, Judi found herself negotiating for a mere fifteen thousand dollars. "I did not know how we were going to do this. ...Our board felt very strongly that we have to be committed to refugees regardless of their background, as I did." So "on a wing and a prayer," Judi proceeded to pivot HIAS PA to address the needs of immigrants of all ethnicities and religions, while continuing to expand the services it could offer.

The early challenges Judi faced with funding and expansion required commitment and vision -- the ability to see the light at the end of the tunnel, as well as the tenacity to keep putting one foot in front of the other along the way. "You...just have to start small and do a good job and start identifying additional needs and make a case for it. You grow and...a lot is identifying needs and competencies." With funding help from national HIAS and increasing grants from the federal government, Judi and her staff began to implement new programs, like English language classes in Philadelphia schools and outreach to the asylee community when new benefits became available. The success of these initiatives attracted more attention -- and funding -- to HIAS PA. Judi focused on building trust with stakeholders and networking in order to continue to grow HIAS PA's base of support. Over time, to

support HIAS PA's growth trajectory, Judi increased the staff to nearly forty personnel, serving thousands of clients per year with legal services, education, and resettlement assistance.

## **Management style: people first, growth always**

Judi attributes the success of HIAS PA in large part to the excellence and commitment of the staff, which have built a strong reputation in the immigration services and legal communities. Making good hiring decisions is a core element of her management approach. "I always look for somebody who's really committed to the mission.

Commitment has to trump everything else. But they also have to have good skill sets. And it depends on the position -- if it's an attorney position, I'd like to see them have experience in immigration and to see...how they've been creative with cases. Creativity is another thing I look at."

Getting the right people also depends on a nonprofit organization's ability to convey its needs for a given position, and to be mindful of the client community's needs. "You also have to write a really good job description. We did that and we also did a lot of team interviewing, so it wasn't just one person -- I felt that was important because we got a lot of peoples' perspectives." Using the example of the hiring process for a program director, Judi explained the benefits of this approach. "I

felt it was very important for some of the staff from the community be in those interviews and give feedback and ask questions and tell us if that person would be a good fit. That's where diversity comes in -- it's very helpful."

The unique dynamics of immigration-related work can pose additional challenges for human resources decisions, which have to be taken into account in the strategic planning process. "You have to assess almost every year what your staffing is going to be. If you have a low number of arrivals, you may need to have less staff... although HIAS made a decision this year not to [reduce staff]. It's difficult because you're paid per refugee, per capita -- so the fewer refugees, the less money you have from the government, so one part of the strategic planning has to be developing a reserve fund and developing non-government resources." Again, Judi emphasized growth as a solution. In lean times, HIAS PA had to "think broader than resettlement. What other programs can you put in place beyond the resettlement program that is dependent on per capita [clients served]?"

Judi is confident the staff is well-positioned for success beyond her tenure. "We have good leadership now, through our new executive director -- I'm very happy. ... More changes are on the horizon, but they're good ones."

## **Challenges ahead**

Judi is deeply worried about changes in immigration policy that have reduced the number of refugees admitted annually, and constraints on who may be admitted as such. "I believe that any policy that's based on religious discrimination or racism is wrong, and eventually will backfire...if we want people to treat us in a respectful manner, we need to have programs in place that welcome refugees and immigrants." In light of the challenges ahead, Judi noted the strong response of the community. "I can't tell you how many people, including in my own community, want to do something -- they want to step up, they want to adopt refugee families -- but first, the families have to get here."

## **References**

Chang, M. Interview with Retired HIAS Executive Director Judi Bernstein-Baker [Personal interview]. (2017, June 30).

HIAS PA. "Our Mission." (n.d.). Retrieved July 26, 2017, from <http://hiaspa.org/about/mission-legacy>

HIAS PA. "Services." (n.d.) Retrieved July 26, 2017, from <http://hiaspa.org/services>