

Key Impact Consulting with GfK Ukraine
Yuval Ofek, Krisztina Varga, Varvara Podnos



Evaluation of the JDC-FSU Volunteer Community

Joint Distribution Committee

Executive Summary

May 2019



1. Introduction

An effective tool for community development and welfare service provision, volunteering has always been a cornerstone activity in JDC structures across FSU countries, but in the past, this usually meant elderly volunteering for the elderly. In 2014, a decision was made to expand the relevant scope of volunteering – branching out to other target audiences, creating cross-generational experiences, and developing projects to meet the wider spectrum of community needs. To facilitate this process, JDC-FSU launched the FSU Volunteer Community Program (hereafter “the program” or “FSU-VC”), its main goal being to *“promote and develop community life and resources through solidarity, responsibility, and resilience.”* The program envisioned the integration of volunteer centers (VCs) into existing JDC-FSU infrastructures (Heseds and Jewish community centers [JCCs]), while providing local staff with capacity development in this field.

Funded by the Joint Distribution Committee (JDC), Key Impact Consulting, assisted by GfK Ukraine/Info Sapiens, performed an external evaluation of FSU-VC. The evaluation was carried out over a ten-month span, between July 2018 and May 2019, and culminated in this report.

2. Evaluation approach and methodology

The evaluation design relied on several approaches, including the logic model, actor-oriented theory of change approach, network analysis approach, and case study design. This evaluation, as requested by the JDC Planning and Program Development Division, involved the in-depth analysis of five VCs in three countries (in Kishinev, Moldova; Dnepro, Lviv, and Kherson, Ukraine; and Yekaterinburg, Russia). Each case contributed new information about various categories, leading to a set of general lessons learnt. The following constituted the main goals of this evaluation:

1. Examining how each of the five VCs operates within its organizational context
2. Providing a comprehensive examination of the overall activities of the VCs
3. Examining how the volunteer services benefit the elderly and respond to their social welfare needs
4. Drawing integrative insights for the development of the VCs and of FSU-VC (program level)

The data collection employed a mixed method approach – combined qualitative and quantitative methods. The qualitative inquiry targeted JDC-FSU HQ and regional staff, VC Coordinators, volunteers, beneficiaries, and partners. The quantitative inquiry included three questionnaires, targeting the volunteers and beneficiaries in the five VCs and all the paid VC Coordinators.

3. Findings and lessons learnt vis-à-vis the core issues of volunteer management

Despite increasingly favorable relevant local legislations and changing attitudes, volunteering in general, and organized volunteering in particular, remain sparse in FSU countries. Weak civic involvement and the poor reputation of unpaid work are two lingering common legacies of the Soviet era. As an exception to these trends, JDC’s Hesed system was able to bring many volunteers on board, most of whom are elderly people. However, apart from the Hesed system and some sporadic grassroots initiatives, no notable models for organized Jewish volunteering in FSU countries existed in the past.

Against this backdrop, FSU-VC set itself the daring and innovative goals of expanding the scope of volunteering in Jewish communities and developing a professional volunteer management system

on the ground. This evaluation uncovered many pieces of evidence that show clear progress towards these goals. The data demonstrate that in just a few years since their establishment, the new VCs have become the cornerstone of Jewish volunteering in FSU countries. In terms of final outcomes, this new model has proved greatly to impact the number of people actively engaged in volunteering, to contribute to perception and behavior change among them, while providing a wide range of beneficiaries with relevant and effective services. These results unequivocally point to the effectiveness of the FSU-VC model in the given context. The below sections briefly summarize FSU-VC's achievements with respect to the main parameters that were evaluated, while presenting lessons learnt and reflecting on some broader questions that emerge from the findings.

Professionalization of VC Coordinators: FSU-VC aims to prepare and support Coordinators in running volunteer centers effectively. As findings demonstrate, Coordinators have gained important new knowledge as a result of their participation in local and regional skill-building activities held by JDC-FSU and JDC-Ashalim professionals. Today, most Coordinators have sufficient knowledge to deal with the core issues of volunteer management, with only minor improvements required in this respect. At the same time, high level of satisfaction among Coordinators, volunteers and beneficiaries with different aspects of volunteer management is a further proof to the successes of the program.

Recruitment of volunteers: With assistance from other JDC structures and local partners, VC Coordinators have been able to recruit a significant number of young and middle-aged people to the program, mostly from the local Jewish communities. As a result, FSU-VC has managed to engage new age groups in volunteering that the Hesed system or other grassroots movements could not mobilize previously. Volunteers come with diverse professional backgrounds and some of them, mostly middle-aged participants, put their professional expertise to good use in their projects with the beneficiaries.

Serving diverse beneficiary groups: Besides mobilizing new groups of volunteers, the program also succeeded in serving a diverse group of beneficiaries, at the individual, community- and macro-levels. Just like the volunteers, most beneficiaries are members of the local Jewish communities, and include children at risk or children attending Jewish kindergartens/schools, as well as elderly people visiting the Hesed daycare centers, house-ridden elderly, and people with disabilities. Some volunteer activities – like Shabbat and holiday celebrations – are realized at the community level, while few projects – such as heritage preservation – benefit the Jewish people in general. Moreover, some projects are also implemented for the benefit of those who do not necessarily belong to the Jewish community. Some beneficiaries of these activities include hospitalized children, orphans, people living with HIV and AIDS, and more.

Promoting frequent volunteering: There are high rates (above 50%) of active volunteers who volunteer on a weekly basis, or at least once/twice a month. This figure was also confirmed by (elderly) beneficiaries, most of whom are in touch with the volunteers on a weekly or monthly basis. We can therefore conclude that VC Coordinators have been able to promote frequent volunteering to a relatively high degree. With some changes in the volunteer management (schedule of activities, allocation of projects, or beneficiary group) or in the content of volunteering (more opportunities to make use of one's professional capabilities), occasionally active and inactive volunteers could increase their frequency of volunteering. However, it has also been understood that some of the less active participants do not volunteer more frequently for the simple reason that they cannot or do not

want to do so. Their level of activism does not depend on the program, but on their own circumstances.

Volunteers' training and motivation: Volunteers are offered a variety of learning activities at the VCs in order to prepare them for the volunteering experience and increase their motivation. Learning activities may include training courses, group sessions with a psychologist, coaching sessions or peer-to-peer experiences, like Vokhatons (volunteer hackathons). Findings reveal that these learning activities, and particularly the coaching sessions and the Vokhaton, are very much appreciated. Not only are the learning activities motivational, they also equip the volunteers with new information, mostly about the different beneficiary groups. In some instances, the volunteers also acquire knowledge about Jewish history, symbolism, and traditions. However, this happens more irregularly and only in some centers. While most VCs place a lot of emphasis on preparing their volunteers for the tasks with the elderly or with people with disabilities, there is room for increased efforts in preparing participants to work with children. Therefore, VCs are encouraged to offer learning activities in the educational field too. Moreover, volunteers asked for more frequent peer-to-peer experiences – offline activities within their home countries or abroad, or online forums – where they could share their experiences and learn from each other.

Offering a variety of volunteer activities: Today, VCs run a wide variety of volunteer projects. Some of these activities are developed in-house to assist other JDC programs (Heseds or JFS), and as such they are unique to the centers. Others, like certain social welfare services, are broadly promoted by the program. These activities (e.g., occasional or regular home visits/phone calls to beneficiaries, accompaniment, Shabbat/holiday celebrations, and more) are implemented in several centers. A handful of VCs also encourage bottom-up initiatives by the volunteers. This may happen through formal or informal channels, or by cooperating with other JDC programs, such as young leadership programs (Metsuda or post-Metsuda). VCs that purposefully nurture bottom-up initiatives do not respond to the needs on the ground in the usual way, but they do bring about innovation in service provision, while developing local leadership and galvanizing their communities. In this sense, these VCs become more than just volunteer centers and double as social or community hubs.

Promoting perception change among volunteers: FSU-VC has managed positively to influence the volunteers' attitudes on several fronts: Interviewees talked about a shift in their attitudes towards the meaning of volunteering and the importance of activism and solidarity. Others reported to have become more understanding and accepting of vulnerable populations, such as people with disabilities or the elderly. Finally, volunteering was found to be a self-developmental experience to many participants, which helped them become more confident and find a new sense of meaning.

Social welfare provision to elderly beneficiaries: It is one of the main goals of FSU-VC to address social welfare needs of elderly clients through volunteering. Most of the volunteers' welfare services promote some form of interaction and socialization with the elderly. Evidence from the centers show that these types of services complement, rather than duplicate, assistance provided by other JDC programs. Elderly beneficiaries are generally happy with what is currently available to them, and highly satisfied with how the volunteers deliver their services. Even those who requested some additional help usually referred to services that were generally available in most FSU-VCs, but they might have been absent in some specific locations or not offered to specific clients. Home repairs and house help, for instance, are two services that are not offered in all VCs, even though elderly

beneficiaries and Hesed employees alike would like to have more, higher quality support in these fields. Therefore, VCs should strive to make as many of the general services available as possible.

The volunteers' services are both relevant and influential to elderly beneficiaries. As the evaluation revealed, interaction with the volunteers means the elderly gain some new information, like computer literacy, foreign language skills, and in some cases, Jewish traditions, such as Shabbat ceremonies. Moreover, volunteer activities positively influence the elderly beneficiaries' self-perceived confidence in their daily task management, connectedness to other people, and to some extent, their mobility. The volunteers' assistance seems to be the most effective when the different activities are combined and offered as a package, rather than as sporadic, standalone services. Therefore, even when Hesed social workers recommend a specific type of assistance for an elderly, VC Coordinators and volunteers are advised to be forthcoming and offer various other types of services, in order to maximize contribution.

Community-building in the VCs: Most VCs have already come a long way as far as relationship-building among different actors. Findings show that volunteers have good relations with their Coordinators, fellow volunteers, and beneficiaries. Most beneficiaries also indicated that they had forged good personal relations with the volunteers. In addition, there were some encouraging examples where volunteers kept in touch with each other or with elderly beneficiaries outside the program framework, though such instances remained sporadic. Despite these successes, not all VCs consider community-building to be integral to volunteering, or as an aspect of the program that local staff should actively promote. A strong sense of community is important for a fuller volunteering experience and for deeper personal connections between volunteers and beneficiaries. It also increases feelings of solidarity, belonging, and pride, while leading to long-term volunteering and yielding immense contribution to both sides. Therefore, VC staff are advised purposefully to invest in relationship-building, among volunteers and between volunteers and beneficiaries. Among volunteers, a sense of community could be further strengthened with more regular learning sessions, facilitated group activities (like the coaching sessions), or by forming pairs/small groups of volunteers for certain tasks, instead of individual volunteering. The latter alternative (pairs/small groups of volunteers) is also likely to help promoting long-term, regular volunteering with elderly beneficiaries, which is currently proving a more challenging objective.

Strengthening relations with the Jewish community: As most Jewish volunteers had already had some sense of community affiliation when they joined the program, the volunteering experience has only moderately increased it. Results were more significant among participants who were previously unaffiliated. These participants have highly increased their understanding of local Jewish communities as a result of their volunteering.

4. Discussions on strategic considerations

Besides these successes, there are a number of broader questions emerging from the findings that should be discussed and addressed at the program level.

System-thinking in VCs: While most VC Coordinators have by now acquired sufficient knowledge to handle the core issues of volunteer management that we have just listed, it does not mean that all of them have attained the skills to handle their VCs' broader work as a whole. Currently, a more strategic outlook on the VC's work is required. As a result, short-term, project-based thinking is prevalent in most centers with a need to increase emphasis on long-term goals, while tasks such as

communication, documentation, monitoring and evaluation, and resource development are either insufficiently addressed or require further investment. It is mostly (though not only) new and inexperienced Coordinators that fall into the trap of project-based thinking and interpret their VCs' work in an overly simplistic manner. System-thinking in the program could be encouraged with the following measures:

- Through more intense, one-on-one work with the Regional Coordinators the program could encourage long-term, goal-oriented programming.
- Moreover, Coordinators will require additional assistance in improving their centers' communication. It would be especially important to improve their VC's online presence – an issue that several volunteers cited in their feedback.
- Documentation, internal monitoring, and evaluation should also be improved.
- Although VC Coordinators are keen on improving their centers' financial flexibility, they are admittedly unskilled in resource development. They are especially interested in learning how to launch income-generating activities (e.g., set up social businesses) and attract in-kind contributions from local businesses. Upcoming learning activities that target Coordinators could address these issues.

The role of elderly volunteers: In places with strong traditions of volunteering in the Hesed system, elderly people end up volunteering in FSU-VC thanks to a cooperation between the two JDC programs. However, some locations - like places where volunteering in Heseds has never really been popular, have no such traditions. As the VCs mostly focus on the recruitment of other age groups (young and middle-aged prospective volunteers), the number of elderly volunteers remains low in these places.

The elderly's involvement as volunteers in the program is crucial for several reasons. First, findings reveal that it is mostly this age group that tends to volunteer for old elderly – a prioritized beneficiary group in FSU-VC. Although the program has been successful in mobilizing other age groups, these tend to prefer children-oriented projects. In addition, there is a time mismatch between young/middle-aged volunteers and elderly beneficiaries, which also limits who may end up volunteering with which beneficiary group. Without substantial numbers of elderly volunteers, FSU-VC will most likely be unable to address the needs of elderly beneficiaries in an effective manner. Furthermore, as shown by the literature review and findings of the evaluation report, volunteering contributes to all participants – including elderly volunteers – in myriad ways. Thus, in locations of no strong volunteering in Heseds, the program misses out on benefitting the elderly, as end beneficiaries and volunteers alike. Centers in these locations are therefore advised to strategize their recruitment further and invest more in attracting the elderly as volunteers.

Mixed volunteer-beneficiary groups: While it is one of FSU-VC's underlying premises that the volunteers themselves also constitute beneficiaries of the program, there are locations where little attention is paid to how vulnerable participants (traditionally recipients of services) may benefit by volunteering themselves. The field data collection found some remarkable examples of traditional recipient groups (such as children at risk, house-ridden elderly, or people living with hearing impairment) getting involved in volunteering. These experiences had an outstanding contribution, as they led to increased self-esteem and self-worth among participants, while promoting diversity and acceptance among fellow volunteers. These instances were also exemplary, because they blurred the boundaries between volunteers and beneficiaries – between those who usually serve and those

traditionally being served. Instead of putting community members into dichotomous categories such as volunteers or beneficiaries, as is currently the common practice in most centers, VCs are encouraged to strive for an organic involvement of all community groups, as much as possible. Most Coordinators – and employees of other JDC programs on the ground (such as Hesed curators and JFS coordinators) – would require FSU HQ's assistance for this shift. Aspects of the volunteer management system should be duly adjusted to accommodate members of such "*non-traditional*" groups. For instance, special projects may need to be developed for volunteers from vulnerable populations, who may also require a different recruitment strategy to get involved (direct invitation), and additional preparation or tighter accompaniment in order to succeed.