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Invest in Families

Editorial

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The consulting group Advancing Women Professionals and the Jewish Community, led by the indefatigable Shifra Bronznick, is persuading, training, cajoling and exhorting American Jewish organizations to adopt family-friendly policies. The goal: 100 sign-ups in 2010. Since only 35% of Jewish communal organizations have paid maternity-leave policies, even though three-quarters of their workforce is female, reaching that goal would have tremendous significance.

So far, 29 organizations have officially joined the campaign — less than a third of the goal. But the latest to sign on is certainly the biggest. In early May, the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee announced a new policy that allows parents up to 12 weeks of paid leave to take care of a baby. (The actual paid time off is dependent on the length of employment at JDC.)

“People often tell me that JDC has the best professional staff,” wrote CEO Steven Schwager in an e-mail from Israel. “This policy simply acknowledges the organization’s responsibility to its staff.”

Plenty of newer, smaller organizations have adopted similar policies that, while paltry compared to Israeli or European standards, at least illustrate a commitment to supporting families. But this can’t be an issue only for the young and hip. When an organization as old and as large as JDC — founded in 1941, with an annual budget of nearly \$300 million — finally adopts a family-leave policy, it should convince others that halfway decent employment practices don’t have to diminish the mission and can improve the recruitment and retention of the workforce.

(The Forward, though not a participant in AWP’s campaign, also recently adopted a paid parental leave policy for the first time, offering up to four weeks paid leave for the birth or adoption of a child. It, too, is dependent on length of employment.)

“So many organizational leaders have told us, ‘We can’t spend all this money on parental leave — we are doing mission-driven work,’” Bronznick said. “But supporting parental leave *is* aligned with mission-driven work.”

Seventy-one to go.

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