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# 'Coming together is what we're all about:' JCC holds annual Big Night celebration

By Sierra Rehm, WPXI.com

March 10, 2024 at 10:00 am EDT



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PITTSBURGH — The Jewish Community Center of Greater Pittsburgh held its annual Big Night celebration on Saturday.

The fundraiser in Squirrel Hill raises money for JCC scholarships and programs and serves as a way to say “thank you” to the community.

“There were a lot of years where we weren’t able to come together like this. So, with community as our middle name, coming together is what we’re all about. In-person celebrating, gathering, that’s really important to us,” said Jason Kunzman, president of JCC of Greater Pittsburgh.

The event featured live music, dancing, food and a silent auction.

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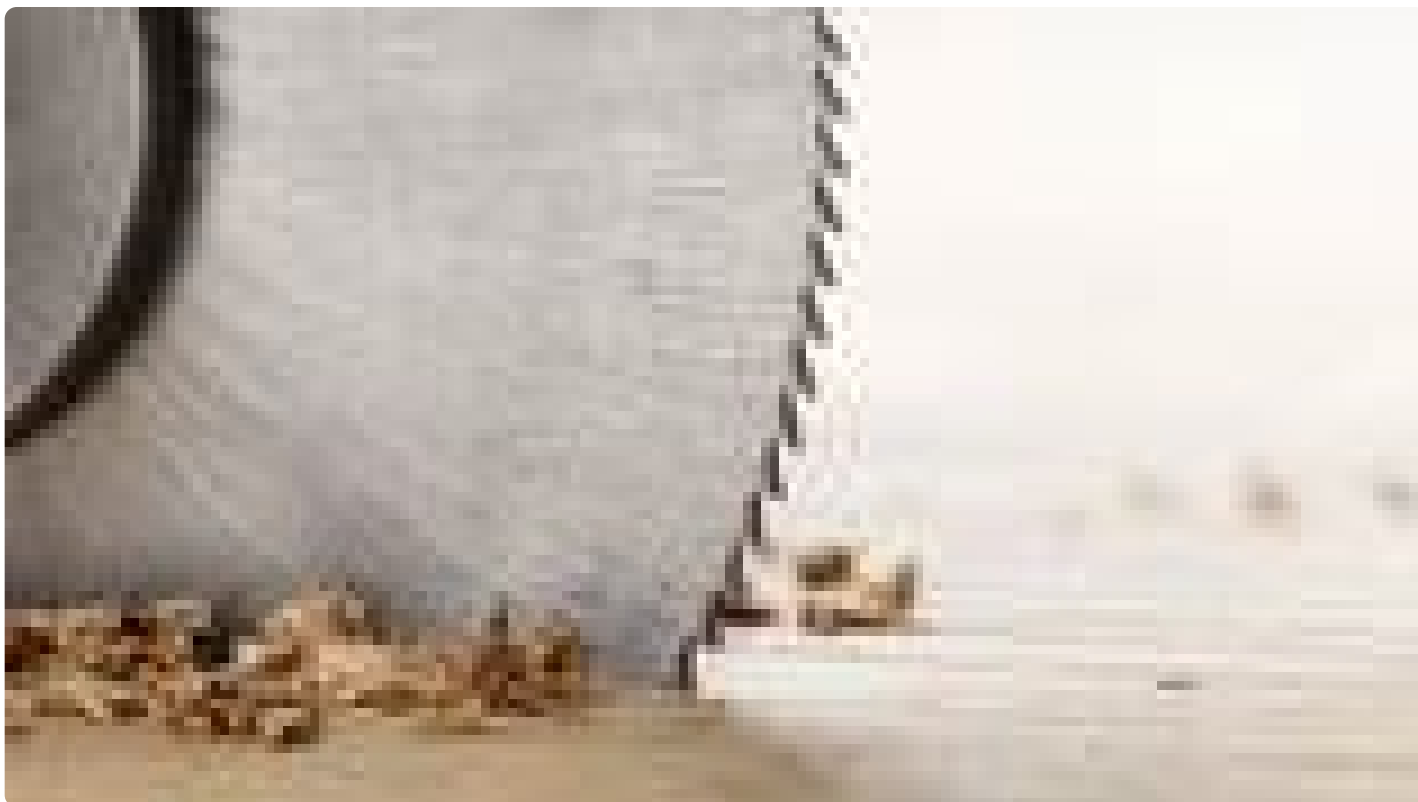


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COMMUNITY / TWO DECADES OF COLLABORATING

# AgeWell at 20: valuable partnership continues serving older adults

'There is a power that goes with collaboration that is above and beyond the sum of the separate parts.'

By **ADAM REINHERZ**

March 11, 2024, 1:47 pm



Jewish Community Center of Greater Pittsburgh President and CEO Jason Kunzman volunteers at an AgeWell J Cafe lunch. (Photo courtesy of Jewish Community Center of Greater Pittsburgh)



Two decades ago, three Jewish agencies collaborated on a communal project that's still paying dividends.

Since its inception in 2004, [AgeWell Pittsburgh](#) has become a nationally celebrated model of care. Thanks to the program's services, thousands of area adults age in place; but before AgeWell's creation, that outcome wasn't as simple. Years ago, the Jewish Association on Aging, Jewish Community Center of Greater Pittsburgh and Jewish Family and Community Services often ran similar programs for the same demographic.

The result was a murky landscape for older adults.

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“When people needed services, they

didn't know where to turn and didn't know how to get it,” JFCS CEO Jordan Golin said.

Community leaders proposed a fix: As opposed to older adults navigating the complexities of finding programs and care, “the burden should be on the organizations,” Golin said.

Accepting that charge required agencies to adopt a new plan, and “part of the vision was that we were going to do away with duplicative redundant services,” he

continued. “We felt that it wasn’t a good use of community resources.” In lieu of three agencies competing for limited funding and pursuing individualized goals, leaders of the groups decided to streamline services and function as a “single continuum.”

With a single name, single phone number and [single website](#), AgeWell became a simplified place for older adults, their loved ones and caregivers to reach. And, when the program was contacted, responses became less about promoting one of the three partnering organizations than ensuring appropriate care was provided, Golin explained.

“In a nutshell, it sounds really straightforward and simple; but in life, nothing is ever straightforward or simple,” he said.

Before coalescing efforts, local organizations spent years developing initiatives, building branding and competing for funding. Staff at the JAA, JCC and JFCS took pride in their work, as did volunteers. Eventually, however, members of the three agencies “recognized that really, the importance of simplifying service access for seniors was more of a priority than promoting individual agency branding,” according to Golin, who began his tenure at JFCS in 2001 by working on a federal grant to bring older adults together in a “more efficient way.”



From left: Hayley Maher, Program Coordinator, AgeWell at the JCC South Hills, and Andrea Watson, AgeWell

Program Coordinator. (Photo courtesy of Jewish Community Center of Greater Pittsburgh)

Throughout the early aughts, partnering organizations experimented with ways of working together.

“There were pros and cons of the different models until we finally ended up with the AgeWell Pittsburgh model,” Golin said.

The program was a success and, in 2017, AgeWell received the [Lodestar Foundation Collaboration Prize](#). The national award, which included a \$150,000 prize, highlighted an “exceptional” model of collaboration among nonprofit organizations.

Now 20 years old, AgeWell serves Allegheny County residents ages 60 and above. Whether through access to J Cafe meals at the JCC in Squirrel Hill or use of the center, countless opportunities are available to members, Sharon Feinman, division director of AgeWell at the JCC, said.

“The value of this collaboration is it provides multiple types of services to Allegheny County,” Nadine Kruman, care navigator at the JAA, said.

If someone wants kosher food delivered to their residence, requires home health care or needs transportation to the JCC to socialize, AgeWell provides a “multi-level approach to care in the home,” she said. “If people have made a decision that they want to remain at home, we’re going to do all that we can to make that happen.”

The majority of older adults want to stay in their residences.

[According to AARP](#), 77% of respondents ages 50 and above wish to “remain in their homes for the long term.”

Thanks to AgeWell, “there is a world out there for people that are seniors — whether active seniors or seniors that are homebound,” Kruman said.

In recent years, AgeWell staffer Maddie Barnes has worked with members on numerous [educational and social programs](#).

Her takeaway, she said, is the importance of creating personal connections.

“Social isolation is definitely a big issue for older adults, and the pandemic really exacerbated that,” she said.

For seniors experiencing loneliness, the “[serious public health risks](#)” posed include greater rates of dementia, heart disease, depression, anxiety and suicide, according to the [Centers of Disease Control and Prevention](#).

Barnes pointed to the creation of AgeWell at the JCC South Hills as an example of the program’s continued ability to counter [social isolation among older adults](#).

Since launching the suburban initiative last year, more than 800 people have enjoyed meals, volunteering and learning opportunities together, she said: “There is a need. People want those in-person programs, the opportunity to connect and be lifelong learners.”



Older adults enjoy lunch at AgeWell at the JCC South Hills. (Photo courtesy of Jewish Community Center of Greater Pittsburgh)

Barnes is the director of technology and evidence-based programming at AgeWell at the JCC. She began her job in September 2018. Between the Pittsburgh synagogue shooting one month later, the pandemic and [rising inflation](#), Barnes’

tenure has been marked with several challenging periods.

[The past five years](#) were not “necessarily what you would call a ‘normal time,’ but just seeing it, it really made me appreciate my job and specifically AgeWell,” she said. “In times of need people step up and they’re here for each other.”

That’s the constant in a program whose population keeps changing, Golin explained.

Twenty years ago, many older adults served by AgeWell were Holocaust survivors. That population has “sadly dwindled,” but what remains unchanged is the “desire for people to remain in Pittsburgh, to strengthen our community, to strengthen our Jewish community,” Golin said.

The commitment has remained AgeWell’s driving force and a model of exemplary behavior, he continued.

“There is a power that goes with collaboration that is above and beyond the sum of the separate parts,” he said. “And I think that AgeWell has not only served as an inspiration for other communities around the country, it’s also served as an inspiration here locally for how collaborations can elevate the quality of the work that we do and the efficiency of the work that we do.

“Our community should be really proud of the fact that we are — as a community — really focused on collaboration and partnership, and that we do believe in the importance of working together to accomplish important things.” **PJC**

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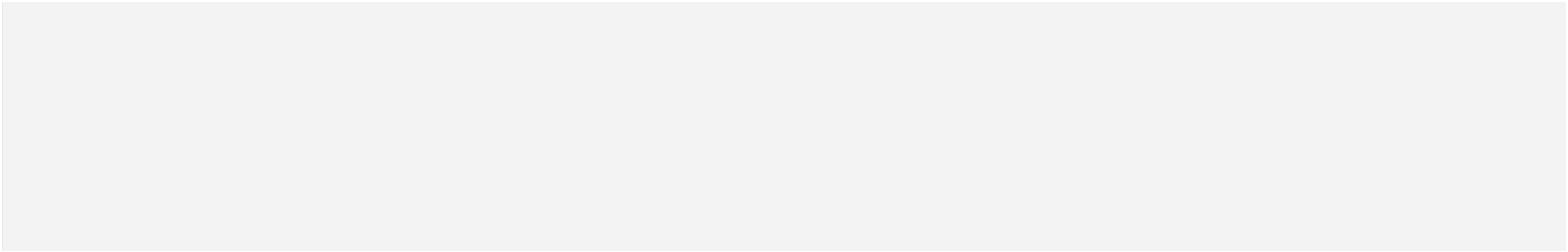
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