

Protecting our people

I'm proud and awed by what happened this month.

So many organizations in the country have walked away from their pension obligations in the last few years. They've had to make many cutbacks. And in their attempts to protect their organizations – a critically important task – they've abandoned those who depended on them more than ever. Pensioners were left with nothing, or with a fraction of what they'd been promised.

We have almost 1,000 eligible pension plan participants who have worked for Federation or our Jewish communal agencies. They rely on us.

But here's the problem: the annual minimum required pension contribution of Federation and our agencies has been rising every year. It costs the community high premiums to insure the pension each year, and those premiums were set to increase on an annual basis. With changing mortality tables (meaning life expectancy is longer – a great thing for people, a new challenge for actuaries), we'd see the pension liability rise even higher. We've tried every possible method to avoid this liability increase, including applying for what's called 'Church Plan status,' to no avail.

But we have inspiring, impressive, and thoughtful leadership. And I'm proud to tell you that this month we've finalized a year-long plan to fully fund the entire Jewish community pension program and keep our promise to the plan participants.

No one got left behind.

Every agency, including Federation, was protected in the process.

Every participant received a choice of a lump sum (based on present value of payments) or an annuity (same as the current benefit).

It was a massive project to collect the data and locate nearly 1,000 beneficiaries.

A small team of lay and professional leaders worked for over a year to arrange for a bank loan, purchase annuities, and liquidate assets in order to protect our organizations – and to keep our promise to those who have worked for our community. I'm grateful to Arthur Schechner, Sam Pepper, Peter Langerman, Eric Harvitt, Neil Goldstein, Michael Elchones, Howard Rabner, Bonnie Sterling, Connie Rosenberg, Barry Milchman, and all those who worked so hard to show our values so clearly.

We don't have a pension plan for new employees (or for most of our current ones) in the Jewish community as a whole. I believe that, together, we should start thinking about this, as a statement of values and ethical support for our communal professionals.

But this first step, to honor our commitments to those who've worked so hard for all of us, is a good beginning.

To all our pensioners, and to all those who dedicate themselves faithfully in meeting the needs of the community – כל מי שעוסקים בצרכי ציבור באמונה – may we continue to pay their reward and show our gratitude.