

# Looking Back at Seven Years of the Denver Boulder Jewish Teen Initiative

Key Outcomes & Lessons Learned

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Prepared for  
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# Introduction

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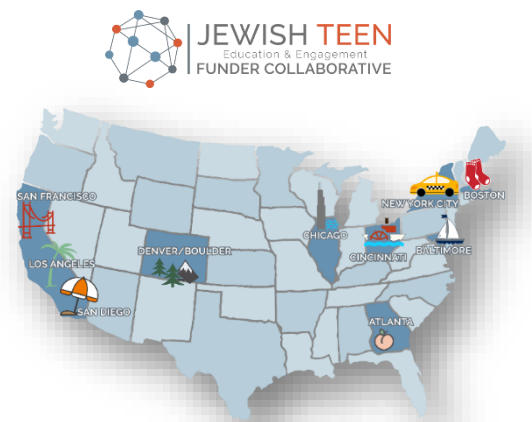
The Denver Boulder Jewish Teen Education and Engagement Initiative (the Initiative) began in 2014 with a partnership between Rose Community Foundation and Jim Joseph Foundation. The Initiative was conceived in part in response to a research project on local Jewish teen engagement conducted in 2010 by Rose Community Foundation’s Jewish Life Committee and the Allied Jewish Federation (now JEWISHcolorado).

The Initiative began its first phase (2014–18) with three objectives and a commitment to encourage innovation in Jewish teen programming. The Initiative’s original objectives were:

1. Increase funding to existing innovators and new projects as a means to provide higher-quality experiences and achieve incremental growth in teen participation.
2. Increase the number and quality of Jewish professionals and trained volunteers working with Jewish teens.
3. Promote youth initiatives and youth-led ideas that engage teens and their peers in Jewish life.

These three objectives provided guidance and direction for the first three years of the Initiative. As the Initiative and the original grantees evolved with time, the Initiative focused on teen programs and teen-led Jewish opportunities (#1 and #3) and became less involved with educator professional development (#2).

The Denver Boulder Jewish Teen Initiative was one of the first of 10 initiatives across the US working collaboratively to create new Jewish teen programming and increase teen engagement. The Jewish Teen Funder Collaborative organized a group of national and local funders to study and explore pathways to greater Jewish teen engagement. Since 2014, each community working with the Collaborative has worked toward a common set of outcomes, expectations, and measures of success, with some additions and adaptations to address specific needs or interests of a sponsoring community. A national evaluation effort, referred to as the Cross-Community Evaluation (CCE), developed tools for this shared measurement and aggregates the data collected from the 10 communities’ evaluations to capture national-level trends and common learnings.



## Initial Funding Strategy

As the Initiative launched for the Denver and Boulder communities, five grantees were selected to be the drivers of change in the Jewish teen landscape. These five programs were selected in large part for their focus on teen-led programming and strong adult-teen relationships. In its original conception, the initial five grantee organizations would work together on overall Initiative outcomes as well as individually on their own organizational targets.

**Boulder Jewish Teen Initiative (BJTI)**, based at the Boulder Jewish Community Center (JCC), was launched as a new program through the Initiative to offer Boulder teens multiple fun ways to explore Judaism through a mix of one-time and ongoing opportunities, events, and activities. The Boulder JCC was able to hire a full-time director and support staff and test different configurations of staffing in its experiments about how to provide diverse teen programs in a small Jewish community. Originally, BJTI aimed to serve as a hub for Jewish programs for teens in the Boulder community by curating a website and program calendar to facilitate relationships among organizations. After four years, it was clear that the best match for their purposes was Jewish Culture Clubs at local high schools. BJTI also created partnerships with Boulder's synagogues and high schools and with Jewish teen programs located in near-by Denver; tested different activities, including a teen advisory board; and concentrated on making the Boulder JCC a central hub for Jewish teen activities. They continued to refine Navig8, their successful program for 8th graders. Navig8 creates an annual cohort of 8<sup>th</sup> graders who are looking for a bridge between b'nai mitzvah programs and the Jewish Culture Clubs in high school. During the pandemic, BJTI shifted from meeting in schools to in-person meetings at the JCC with smaller groups of teens in accordance with public health guidance.

**Jewish Student Connection (JSC)** organizes and provides adult advisors for Jewish student clubs within high schools in the Denver community. The JSC model has evolved to depend heavily on student leaders who select program topics, lead meetings, and recruit new members. JSC advisors maintain one-on-one mentoring relationships with some students outside of club meetings through a variety of modes, including in-person meetings, video chats, and emails and texts. The model began in the Denver area in 2011 as part of the national organization Jewish Student Union but separated during the Initiative into an independent program housed at JEWISHcolorado. JSC has expanded through area high schools to reach hundreds of Jewish teens and their friends. The Initiative funding enabled JSC to hire additional staff members to expand its presence in the area's high schools and to develop its programming for student leaders.

Intended to be the backbone of the Initiative, **jHub** was created in 2014 and housed in Denver's Colorado Agency for Jewish Education (CAJE). As envisioned by planners, jHub would organize community-wide events for teens; convene, train, and support youth professionals in the region; and be a central information point about available teen programs and events on a new and appealing website. jHub also ran a teen internship program for a short time. As the backbone organization, jHub convened a Steering Committee to oversee the Initiative. jHub had its beginnings in the Jewish Youth Professionals Council (JYPC), a collective of teen professionals in the Denver and Boulder communities that was active for many years prior to 2014. Much of the networking and information sharing that JYPC had been doing transitioned to jHub, and by the end of the Initiative's third year (2017), jHub's membership had grown to include more professionals serving Jewish teens, reaching 29 members.

**Moving Traditions** brings together small, intimate groups of teens, usually single-gender groups, with the goals of building positive relationships and thinking more deeply about gender, cultural expectations, ethics, and Jewish life. Support from the Initiative helped Moving Traditions hire its first full-time director in Colorado and experiment with a program model of community groups not based in institutional partner organizations. Over the course of the Initiative, Moving Traditions also launched two new programs that diversify the offerings in the region: (1) Tzelem, serving trans, nonbinary, gender-diverse, and LGBTQ+ teens, and (2) Moving Traditions for B-Mitzvah, a program working in partnership with local Jewish educators to engage middle school youth and their parents through interactive family education sessions in preparation for bar and bat mitzvahs.

**UpStart/PresenTense Colorado** was a new addition to the Denver and Boulder communities, offering Jewish teens a chance to explore entrepreneurship through teen fellowships focused on design thinking. Teens in PresenTense designed and marketed community action projects that reflected Jewish values or teachings, while engaging their Jewish peers in testing prototypes. The program also provided the teen fellows with workshops and business mentors. A Teen Advisory Board and Steering Committee guided the program design. The PresenTense program merged with UpStart-Colorado in 2017, but in 2018 Upstart closed the PresenTense program due to low

enrollment and pivoted the focus of their programming to professional development and learning for Jewish teen professionals.

## **Shifts in the Initiative Landscape & Strategy**

During the Initiative's seven years, there were three points when it shifted its strategy in response to changes in the environment.

**Year 4 (2017–18)** was a year of disruptions and instability among the grantees. Two grantees (JSC and Presentense) transitioned to new organizational homes. One grantee (Moving Traditions) experimented with temporary staffing structures, as their lead staff member was on leave for an extended period of time. The Initiative decided to close jHub and redesign its investment in professional development for leaders of teen programs. Overall, it was a year in which events called for pause and reflection as organizational shifts occurred and settled. For these reasons, by mid-year the Initiative focused its attention on helping the grantees with capacity building and planning. Informing Change served as a strategic planning consultant to the grantees as well as an evaluation coach. The Initiative also provided grantees with management consultants and fund development advisors to help them meet the goals of their Initiative grants.

**Year 5 (2018–19)** began a three-year period in which Informing Change's work focused on technical assistance and coaching of grantees to build their internal capacity for program evaluation. Grantees took on more responsibility to assess Initiative program accomplishments and track teen demographics (see Appendix A for description of expectations of grantees). Year 5 also marked greater awareness and involvement of other teen programs in Initiative activities. The Initiative invited the broader set of Jewish teen program providers in the Denver and Boulder communities to participate in some Initiative activities, including a presentation and discussion of findings from the Funders Collaborative Cross-Community Evaluation national teen survey. About a dozen Jewish teen organizations distributed the CCE teen survey to their program participants, which provided the Initiative with useful data about teens' experiences in a broad array of programs.

During **Years 6 and 7 (2019–21)**, the Initiative undertook new activities to better understand the Jewish teen ecosystems in Denver and in Boulder and to support grantees in their quest for ongoing program sustainability. Activities during this period included using the CCE Sustainability Diagnostic Tool with programs and community leaders, conducting webinars to support grantees and other youth program leaders with evaluation, and providing Youth Mental Health First Aid training for leaders and educators in Jewish youth programs.

## **INITIATIVE EVALUATION**

The Initiative partnered with Informing Change as the external evaluator for the first three years of the Initiative (2014–17). For the second latter half of the Initiative (2018-21), Informing Change served as a coordinator and consultant to the Initiative grantees as they took on greater responsibility for the evaluation of their own program activities.

Prior to designing the original evaluation plan, Informing Change facilitated a process in which the funders and grantees co-articulated a Theory of Change that specified the Initiative's key strategies and target audience (a copy of the Theory of Change can be found in Appendix B). The Theory of Change outlined a robust set of outcomes for expanding Jewish teen engagement overall, enhancing the Jewish learning and growth of teens involved in the Denver and Boulder communities, developing youth professionals and involved adults, and building community capacity to support teen engagement.

### **Phase I of Evaluation (2014–17)**

Based on the Initiative's Theory of Change, the first phase of the evaluation was guided by six evaluation questions (next page):

- **Engaging Teens:** To what extent are a growing number of diverse Jewish teens in the Denver and Boulder communities engaged in Jewish opportunities during their middle school and high school years?
- **Impacting Jewish Teens:** How and to what extent are teens in the Denver and Boulder communities experiencing Jewish learning and growth during their middle school and high school years? In particular, what is the Jewish learning and growth for teens participating in activities supported by the Initiative?
- **Developing Jewish Professionals and Involved Adults:** How and to what extent are Jewish professionals and involved adults in the Denver and Boulder communities increasing their capacity to effectively educate and engage teens?
- **Grantee Accomplishments:** How and to what extent are the programs within the Initiative achieving their goals and intended impacts?
- **Initiative Backbone:** How and to what extent is jHub serving as a backbone organization to the Initiative and creating a whole that is greater than the sum of its parts?
- **Sustainability:** How and to what extent is the community developing capacity and leadership to sustain a priority focus on Jewish teen education and engagement over time?

Between 2014 and 2017 Informing Change conducted a mixed-method evaluation, consisting of surveys and interviews of stakeholder groups, including teens, parents, teen professionals, grantee leaders and their national staff colleagues, community leaders, and funders. Secondary analysis included reviews of grant reports and other relevant materials. Most of the data collection instruments were informed by the questions and instruments developed by the CCE team but also included questions specific to Denver and Boulder.

## Phase II of Evaluation (2017–21)

Starting in the fourth year of the Initiative, the primary role of Informing Change shifted from external evaluator to technical assistance provider. Initiative leaders had observed that grantee leaders were depending almost completely on Informing Change as the external evaluator to measure and assess the outcomes and even track the outputs of their programs. Grantee passivity around evaluation was due in part to operational limitations that their organizations were facing at the time, but also due to lack of knowledge about program evaluation and its benefits. Rose Community Foundation staff saw that technical assistance and coaching could be an avenue to strengthen program capacity for the long term, as well as a support to grantee staff in the short term, and invested in a technical assistance and coaching approach from Informing Change for the remainder of the Initiative.

Informing Change's work in Phase II of the evaluation was to build the internal capacity of the Initiative's grantees to collect, organize, and manage program data on an ongoing basis. Informing Change also worked to align grantees' evaluation work and data collection with CCE requirements, including a CCE teen survey in 2019. Rosov Consulting administered the 2019 teen survey. Informing Change facilitated post-survey reflection and learning from the data by providing customized data tables for grantees and other organizations. Grantees were coached in analyzing and scoring teen participant data for the CCE Teen Background Classification and Teen Jewish Engagement scales, and by the 2019-20 program year each grantee was calculating its own scores.

During years four through seven of the evaluation, Informing Change conducted regular one-on-one coaching sessions with grantees, reviewed and gave feedback on data collection tools, advised on annual plans for assessing progress toward grant outcomes, and worked with grantees to draft their yearly reports to Rose Community Foundation.

# Key Outcomes of Seven Years

The Initiative produced a number of outcomes for teens, grantee organizations, and professionals over the last seven years. The following are some of the key outcomes, informed by data collected over the entirety of the Initiative. Where possible, we show comparisons between identical or similar items across the years for which there is data.

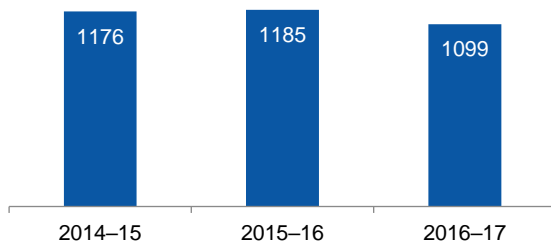
## QUALITY PROGRAMS FOR JEWISH TEENS

**Over 1,000 teens per year participated in high-quality Jewish teen programming through the Initiative.**

In years 1–3 and 5–6 of the Initiative, over 1,000 teens per year were involved in Initiative programs (Exhibit 1 and 2). Year 7 enrollment numbers were impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic.

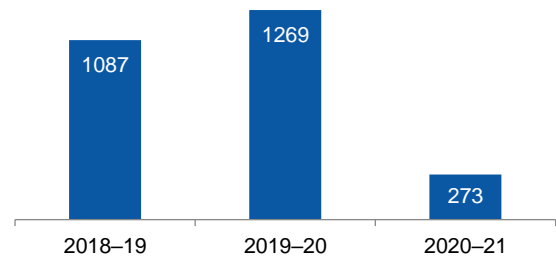
### Enrollment for years 1–3\*

Exhibit 1 | n=5 grantees | Teens served by Initiative grantees (duplicated count)



### Enrollment for years 5–7\*

Exhibit 2 | n=3 grantees | Teens served by Initiative grantees (duplicated count)



\*Year 4 (2017–18) enrollment data was not reported to Rose Community Foundation.

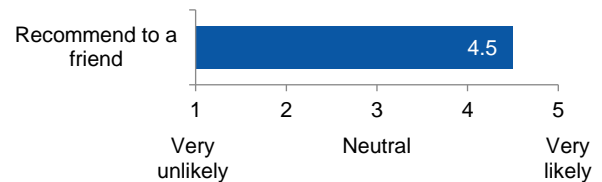
**Teens who participated in Initiative programs experienced positive outcomes.**

Over the course of the seven years of the Initiative, survey results showed that Jewish programs provided teens with enjoyable programs and experiences. On average, teens who participated in Initiative programs are very likely to recommend them to a friend (Exhibit 3).

Almost all Initiative teens from the 2019 teen survey reported that being involved in Initiative programs increased their overall feeling of involvement in Jewish life and connection to the Jewish people (Exhibit 4, page 6). The majority said that Initiative programs helped them

### Likelihood to recommend program to a friend

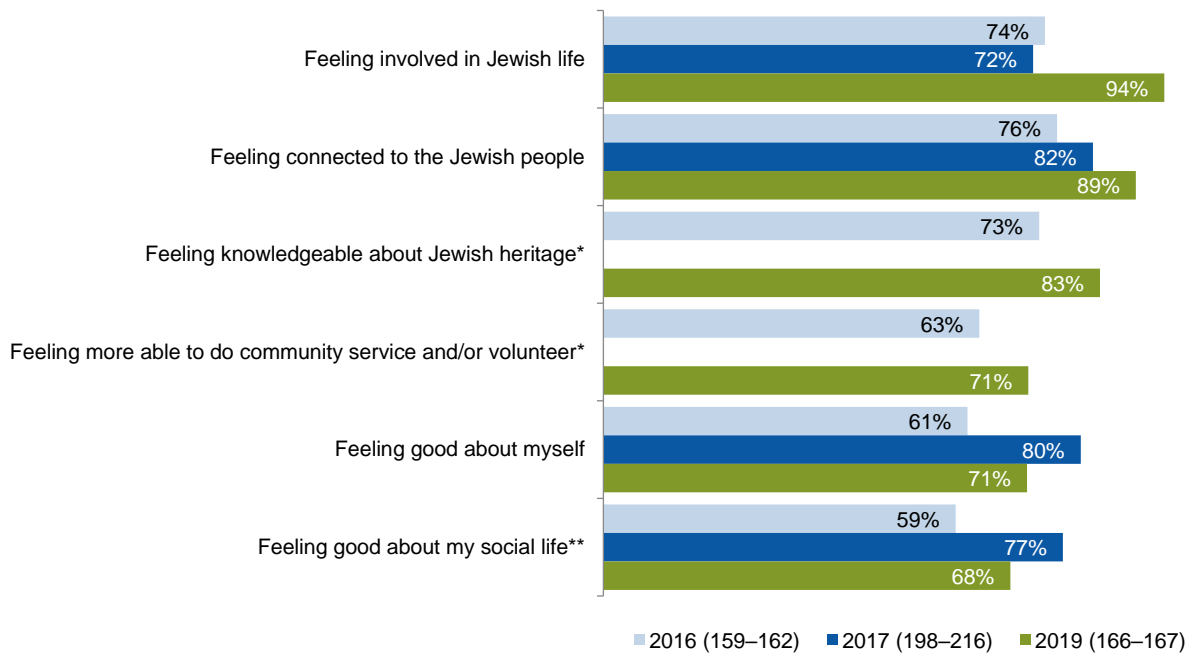
Exhibit 3 | n=374 unique teens from 2015–17 who participated in Initiative programs



feel better about themselves and their social lives. Generally, a larger portion of Initiative teens saw increases in these items compared to non-Initiative Jewish teens in Denver and Boulder.<sup>1</sup>

### Change as a result of Jewish activities

Exhibit 4 | Source: Teen Surveys | Percentage of teens reporting an increase



\*Item was not asked in 2017

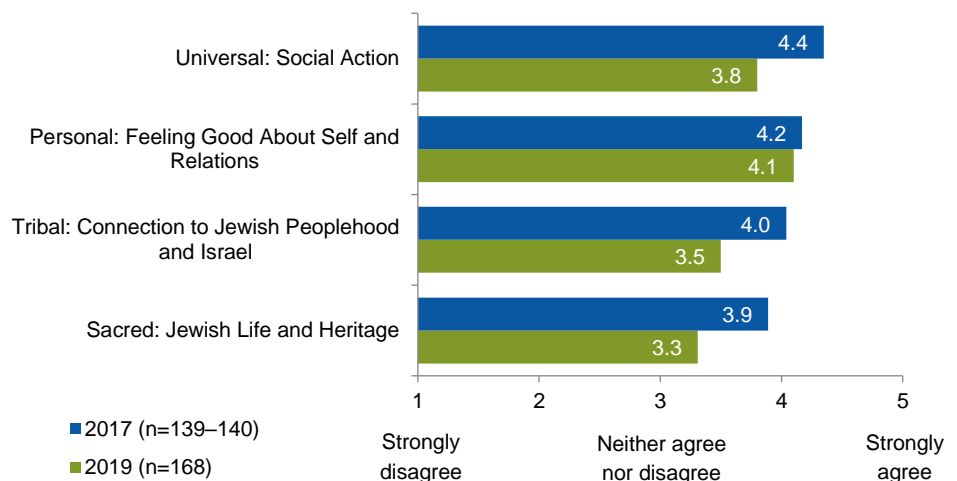
\*\*A similar but not exact item from 2017 was used here: "I've made some really good friends in Jewish activities."

Through Initiative programs, teens also grew in their Judaism and sense of connection to the Jewish community. The majority of teens who participated in Initiative programs in 2016–17 reported increases in the 13 Jewish learning and growth outcomes from the CCE teen survey. These outcomes relate to how teens feel about themselves, their connections to the Jewish community, social responsibility, and Jewish life and heritage. 2019 survey results for Initiative teens were comparable to those in 2017.

Similar to teens in other communities participating in the Funders Collaborative, Initiative teens consistently report that they gain a sense of belonging from their Jewish teen programs. Data collected by grantees each year consistently show strong evidence of teens valuing the connections they make with other Jewish teens and adults. The grantee programs offer them opportunities to have conversations with trustworthy adult program

### Initiative teens' responses to Jewish learning and growth outcomes

Exhibit 5 | Source: Teen Surveys



<sup>1</sup> Although the Initiative focused on grantees in its funding and offers of support, the surveying in 2019 was more expansive and included all of the Jewish teen/youth programs in the region.

leaders who appreciate them for who they are. For communities like Denver, with small Jewish populations, these programs give Jewish teens the chance to find a Jewish community that feels right for them.

**Initiative programs engaged teens who had few previous Jewish experiences.**

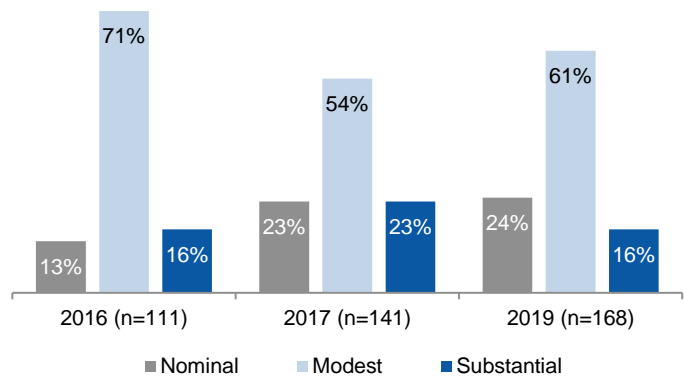
One of the national-level goals for all the initiatives is to increase the participation of Jewish teens who are un- or underengaged in Jewish life. The Denver Boulder Initiative has seen a number of successes related to that goal.

The proportion of teens from nominal Jewish backgrounds<sup>2</sup> participating in the Initiative has increased since the Initiative’s start. In 2017 and 2019, significantly more Jewish teens were from nominal Jewish backgrounds compared to 2016. The 2019 survey results also show that a larger portion of teens participating in Initiative programs have modest Jewish backgrounds compared to non-Initiative Jewish teens.

For some Denver and Boulder Jewish teens, the Initiative was their first experience with Jewish teen programs. One in five Jewish teens in 2017 said their only Jewish program experience was through the Initiative programs.

**Jewish background classifications of Initiative teens**

Exhibit 6 | Source: Teen Surveys



**Two grantee program models have been particularly successful at engaging teen participants.**

Initiative grantees saw success with two program models—high school-based clubs and teen-led programming. By partnering with high schools to run clubs, both JSC and BJTI were able to significantly expand their reach while keeping their own staff lean. While this model may be considered light touch by some, the club programs have documented high levels of repeat attendance and retention over multiple years. For example, in the most recent program year, three out of four unique JSC participants attended 10 or more JSC activities.

The shift to having more teen-led activities within programs is a direct response to feedback from teens. In the 2017 teen survey, one of the common suggestions teens made for how to strengthen programs was to be more teen-led. Out of the Initiative grantees, JSC in particular has embraced this model; their teen leaders now facilitate most, if not all, club sessions. Teens also come up with ideas for and develop the content for program meetings or events. JSC reports that the interest in club leadership positions has grown, with freshmen and sophomores eager to join the juniors and seniors on planning teams and as program presenters. The results of the 2021 community-level Sustainability Diagnostic Tool (SDT) also revealed that teen-led programming is gaining traction at the ecosystem-level, although the degree to which programs are engaging teens varies from teens independently developing and leading all program content to soliciting teens periodically for feedback.

<sup>2</sup> The CCE developed a scale to classify the Jewish backgrounds of participating teens. There are three categories: substantial, modest, and nominal. Scores are determined by survey responses about Jewish family life and Jewish experiences prior to high school.



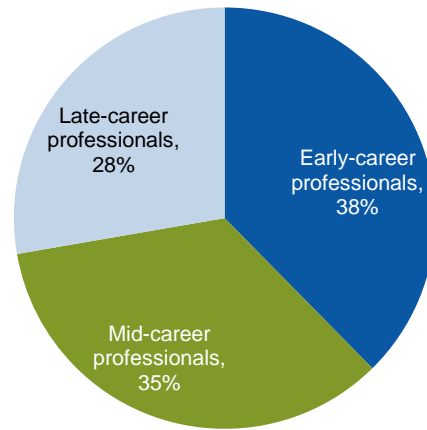
## SUPPORTING TEEN PROFESSIONALS

### Teen professionals in Denver and Boulder are skilled and committed to working with Jewish teens.

The Initiative conducted two surveys in 2016 and 2017 in order to learn more about the professionals serving Jewish teens in Denver and Boulder. Based on 2017 survey data, teen professionals in the region were almost evenly split in their career stages. Nearly 40 percent were early-career professionals, meaning they have a bachelor's degree and two years or fewer of experience in their current role. One-third were mid-career, with advanced degrees and up to three years' experience in their current role. Almost 30 percent were late-career and have either a higher-level degree (doctorate or rabbinate/cantorate) or more than four years of experience working with Jewish teens or in their current role. Most of these professionals are also committed to their work with Jewish teens, at least for the near future. The majority of the teen professionals surveyed in 2016 and 2017 thought it was at least somewhat likely they would still be working with Jewish teens in their current role within the following two years.

#### Career stages of Denver-Boulder Jewish teen professionals

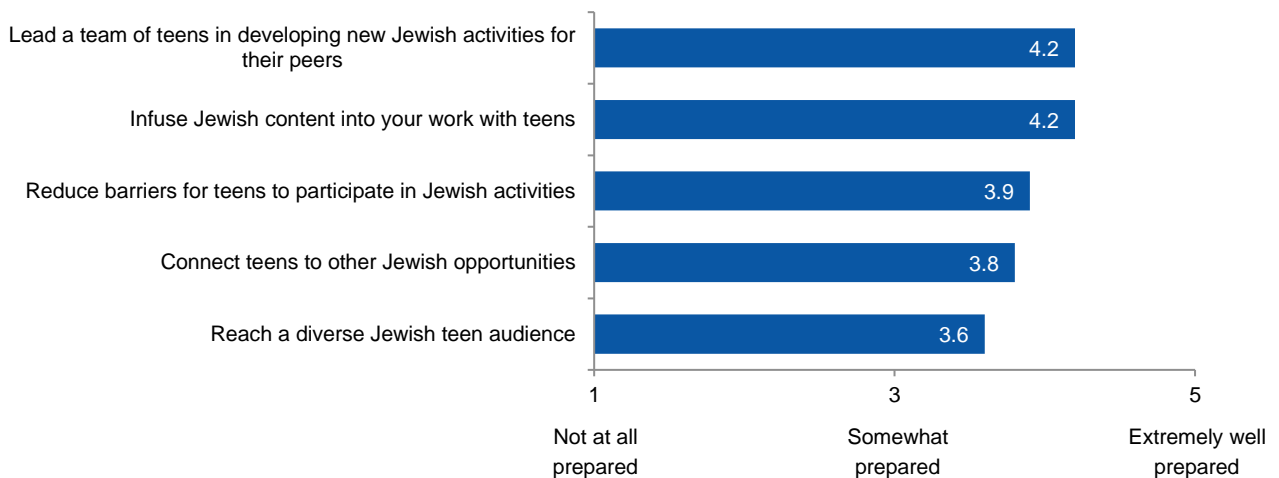
Exhibit 7 | Source: 2017 Professionals Survey | n=28



Teen professionals in Denver-Boulder report feeling generally prepared and confident about working with teens. The majority of professionals surveyed in 2017 felt prepared to lead teens in developing new Jewish activities, to infuse Jewish content into their work with teens, to reduce barriers to participation in Jewish activities, and to connect teens to other Jewish opportunities (Exhibit 9). The 2016 professionals survey showed similar results.

#### Teen professionals' average levels of preparedness to...

Exhibit 8 | Source: 2017 Professionals Survey | n=23-28



Denver-Boulder teen professionals also felt confident in their abilities to support teens' personal development, particularly with helping teens connect with counselors or staff, feel good about participating, and make good friends at Jewish activities (Exhibit 9, page 9).

## Teen professionals' self-reported skill levels

Exhibit 9 | Source: 2017 Professionals Survey | n=25–28 | Percentage of professionals reporting they feel fairly well or extremely skilled



## DEEPENED UNDERSTANDING OF THE JEWISH TEEN ECOSYSTEM

The Initiative has made several contributions to helping community leaders better understand how the various programs, organizations, and stakeholders concerned about teens make up a Jewish teen ecosystem. Over the course of the last two years, the Initiative's study of the ecosystem strengths and gaps has clarified that Boulder and Denver have separate Jewish teen ecosystems, with some overlapping relationships that connect the two.

### Examining Jewish Teen Program Sustainability

Over the course of the Initiative, the interactions and interdependencies among teen programs have become clearer to grantees and funders. Two examples of interdependencies within the ecosystem are publicizing age-appropriate programs (e.g., programs and religious schools inform middle school students about Jewish activities awaiting them in high school) and building teen confidence and knowledge by layering multiple program experiences (e.g., teens returning from the Israel Study Trip then presenting lively programs in other teen programs throughout the year).

To gain a better understanding of the Jewish teen ecosystem and how community and program leaders perceive its strengths and gaps, Informing Change conducted key informant interviews in 2021 using the Sustainability Diagnostic Tool (SDT) developed by the CCE. The SDT prompted reflections from program and community leaders in Denver and Boulder on the development and sustainability of their own organization's teen programs as well as on the region's Jewish teen education and engagement ecosystems.

According to these interviews, local teens and families have access to a variety of good, steady Jewish teen programming led by knowledgeable teen program leaders whose skillsets are good to excellent. In general, stakeholders have a positive outlook for the short-term future of Jewish teen programming post-pandemic. Interviewees did express some concerns about the ability of grantee programs to rebound quickly from the COVID-19 pandemic, particularly related to budget cuts and layoffs that have affected the availability of staff for teen programs. As for the longer-term future of quality programming for Jewish teens, interviewees thought there was a need for more community leaders beyond Rose Community Foundation to pay attention to the overall quality and diversity of teen programming in Denver and Boulder. Through the documentation and sharing of these findings, Rose Community Foundation and Initiative leaders hope to prompt more conversations around building up the Denver and Boulder Jewish teen ecosystems. See Appendix C for the full summary of findings.

## Training Educators to Respond to Youth Mental Health Challenges

As part of the Jewish Teen Funder Collaborative, the Initiative was able to offer a nationally recognized youth mental health first aid (YMHFA) training to youth educators in the region during 2020. Trainers from the Collaborative provided the unique opportunity for training participants from Denver and Boulder to view the information and guidance of the training through a Jewish lens.

Informing Change developed a survey to capture how YMHFA training participants are applying YMHFA learning to their work with Jewish youth, along with assessing the community needs around youth mental health supports and resources. The results of the survey showed that participants in the YMHFA training gained skills and confidence that enhance the well-being of Jewish teens in Denver and Boulder. Further, these Jewish youth educators are raising awareness with colleagues in their organizations. In general, the survey respondents indicate a comfort and readiness to draw on internal policies and procedures at their organization for support, as well as external mental health resources in the Denver and Boulder communities. Rose Community Foundation disseminated the summary of survey findings to key Jewish communal organizations, religious schools, and others concerned with Jewish youth development in the region. The summary is included in Appendix D.

## EVALUATION & DATA CAPACITY BUILDING

During the second phase of the evaluation, the Initiative grantees received direct support and guidance to develop their programs' internal capacity to do ongoing program evaluation. By 2020, all of the grantees demonstrated significant growth in staff knowledge and skills around program evaluation, as well as improved internal systems for data collection and analysis. Some improvements were due to increased awareness and knowledge of program leaders, as well as efforts to ensure that the onboarding of new staff included at least one work session with Informing Change about program evaluation and the Initiative's evaluation expectations. However, the greatest gains in capacity must be attributed to program leaders being required to practice evaluation within a structured and supervised annual program evaluation cycle.

The capacity building activities provided by Informing Change in Phase II included:

- A 90-minute customized workshop for each program, held at their site and designed for their evaluation needs; site visits occurred in 2018 and 2019 but were not possible in 2020 due to pandemic restrictions
- Review and revision of participant enrollment and event registration forms
- Review and feedback on data collection tools for participant outcomes (e.g., end-of-program survey)
- Worksheets and written resources to assist programs with creating an annual evaluation plan, creating data collection tools, and tracking and storing data, as well as calculating the CCE-required teen background classification and teen engagement scores
- TA and coaching in support of data collection, analysis, and reporting
- Phone or video consultation sessions four to six times each year
- Assistance with integrated data analysis at the end of the program year and developing findings statements about their progress toward the Initiative grant outcomes and targets

Informing Change also hosted several training and professional development opportunities that were open to all teen and youth professionals in the Denver and Boulder communities. A webinar held in the fall of 2020 demonstrated how program leaders could use embedded assessment techniques in virtual programming to collect data for evaluation. This topic was especially relevant to programs that transitioned to a virtual format due to the COVID-19 pandemic. In the spring of 2021, Informing Change led a two-part interactive workshop designed to increase professionals' skills in data-informed program design and decision making. The series used a case study method to give participants the chance to apply their existing knowledge and their experience to a fictional evaluation problem, as well as a chance to work collaboratively with other teen professionals in the region.

## **Supporting Program-level Sustainability Planning**

Under the guidance of Informing Change, the Initiative grantees used a new program-level Sustainability Diagnostic Tool developed by the CCE along the same lines of the community-level SDT described above. Informing Change used the tool to facilitate a structured 75-minute discussion about future sustainability with a small team at each grantee organization. The groups ranged in size from three to five people and engaged fund development and management team members as well as the teen program leaders. These discussions, and the side-conversations they prompted within the organizations, were useful as a team-building and educational mechanism for grantees' internal work on teen program sustainability. The CCE tool helped teams get "unstuck" from only focusing on external funding sources; it stimulated new ideas about program demand, program marketing, partnerships, and awareness and support needed from their management teams and boards.

## Challenges & Lessons Learned

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The Jewish Teen Initiative was an opportunity for the Denver and Boulder Jewish communities to create new types of programming for Jewish teens. Bringing in new programs and seeking innovation and change was exciting but also challenging. Looking back, the Initiative had three major challenges, each connected to a specific time period in the arc of the Initiative's growth and development.

**The demands on new programs as they launched in a new community:** The early years of the Initiative were marked by a sense of newness and experimentation as well as a lot of effort and coordination as four new programs defined themselves, hired staff, and made themselves known in the local communities, while the fifth grantee pushed out its boundaries for a program expansion. The early years were also marked by challenges with integrating the new approaches of the Initiative with the network of ongoing teen programs in the two communities.

### Lessons learned

- Don't underestimate the time required (many months) for a new program to position itself in a new community. Even with comfortable financial resources, it takes time to hire and onboard staff, find good partnerships, articulate a new program, and position the new program relative to the other programs active in the community.
- Being part of a cohort of supportive peers—leaders of other teen programs, especially other new teen programs—supports new program staff, and helps new programs put down roots and publicize programs.

**Loss of a backbone organization:** Because this Initiative was one of the first of its kind to launch, local leaders were not able to follow the footsteps of or learn from examples set by Jewish Teen Initiatives in other cities. Among the lessons that probably would have surfaced from other communities is the importance of a backbone organization in a multi-year collaborative effort designed to have impact across a whole community. A backbone organization handles operational tasks and facilitates communications and networking among program leaders. jHub had been designated to serve in this role but closed at the mid-point of the Initiative, for a number of reasons. At the time, Initiative leaders believed the tight collaborative group of grantees could continue without a backbone and the professional development function could be covered by another grantee. However, no program or individual felt accountable for convening the full group of teen program providers in the region or facilitating their networking and cross-program communications. This created challenges for communicating about Initiative activities and requests; it took extra work to convey information from the Initiative so that it would not be perceived as coming solely from Rose Community Foundation.

### Lessons learned

- In a collaborative effort, specifically designate an organization or individual to be responsible for facilitating joint activities, communications, and cross-program networking.
  - Anticipate that although a funder may be the convener or central point of an initiative at its start, the convener role will transition to an operational role which might not align with the funder's interests or long-term intentions.
  - An informal structure can be just as successful in providing teen program leaders with networking and information sharing as something structured. Don't overbuild it.
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**The unavoidable disruptions of staff turnover and organizational restructuring:** By the mid-point of the Initiative's seven years, the Initiative was weathering a storm of staff turnover among key program staff. There was also significant organizational restructuring occurring in the large organizations that sponsored three of the grantees.

#### **Lessons learned**

- During staff transitions and organizational restructuring, revise or adjust short-term expectations for program outputs and outcomes; help impacted organizations identify and then focus on the most important outputs and outcomes.
- Be prepared to shore up a grantee's operational capacity with short-term consultant help during a period of organizational crisis.

## Implications & Recommendations

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From Informing Change’s evaluation of the Initiative, including our evaluation consultations with grantees, we see five major implications for continuing to strengthen Jewish teen education and engagement in Denver and Boulder.

1. It will be important to find ways to ensure that the two Jewish communities involved in the Initiative, Denver and Boulder, each continue to offer a mix of diverse and high-quality programs that appeal to teens. The diversity and quality of programs available prior to the COVID-19 pandemic were delivering good results for Jewish teens and their families. To maintain this diversity and quality will require an ongoing monitoring of the Jewish teen ecosystems. Such monitoring, which has been the work of Initiative leaders over the past seven years, could be done in the future either by community leaders or by the network of teen program providers themselves. However, without some structure or mechanism to monitor teen opportunities and their quality, it is likely that no one will pay attention to the coming and going of programs, as each teen program will, understandably, tend to focus on their own programs and not the broader ecosystem.

**Recommendation:** Find a way for each community (Denver and Boulder) to maintain a structure (e.g., committee, annual convening, ongoing network) that will stay informed about available teen programs and opportunities, keep an eye on program quality, and stay aware of parent and teen satisfaction with the existing programs.

2. Many strong Jewish teen programs across the country have tried to identify and recruit Jewish teens who have little or no connection with Jewish education and engagement; in our evaluation work in several communities, we have seen very small degrees of success in these efforts. In contrast, this Initiative has had successful enrollment growth in high school-based Jewish teen clubs, including growth in the proportion of teens who report low scores in Jewish background and Jewish teen engagement. School-based club activities such as Jewish Student Connection and Boulder’s Jewish Culture Clubs offer all teens easy access – at school, no fees, no expectations (spoken or unspoken) of prior levels of Jewish experience – making it more appealing for the Jewish teen with a nominal Jewish background to participate.

**Recommendation:** Continue to support no-fee school-based clubs to provide program opportunities for high school age Jewish teens. Having a few Jewish teen program options with low barriers to entry is important in all communities, but especially so where there are smaller populations of Jewish youth or where Jewish families are geographically dispersed.

3. Engaging high school teens for the first time in Jewish programs is difficult because of the many competing demands on teens’ times. The Initiative grantees have found that an effective alternative to this recruitment challenge is to engage eighth-grade students in programs that intentionally introduce them to Jewish teen program options in the high school years ahead of them. BJTI and Moving Traditions both had success with their middle school programs and learned about the importance of communicating with parents for this age group. Unlike high school teens, who make more independent decisions about their

Jewish program activities, middle school teens' choice of extra-curricular activities is still heavily influenced by parents.

**Recommendation:** Encourage Jewish teen programs to identify and build partnerships with programs for Jewish middle school youth. Find out whether and how eighth-grade Jewish teens and their parents receive information about Jewish teen activities.

4. Strong outcomes and steady teen enrollment in Jewish teen programs depend on having skilled program leaders who know how to work with teens. To continue the Initiative's work on diversity and quality in Jewish teen programming, program leaders will need opportunities for training and professional development. Those who are affiliated with national Jewish organizations, such as JCCs and denominational programs, may have access to national training events and networks, but local educational programs and training events are critical supports for professionals in smaller stand-alone organizations. Professional development helps program leaders feel valued by their organization and by the broader Jewish community and contributes to longer tenure in their positions.

**Recommendation:** Review the types of relevant training and professional development available to teen program leaders. Consider ways to ensure that all teen program leaders in the two communities have frequent opportunities for professional development.

5. Information sharing across Jewish teen programs helps to build enrollment and to retain teens who "age out" or lose interest in their Jewish activities. As professionals get to know and trust one another, as happened among the Initiative grantees, they are more likely to refer the teens they meet to one another's programs. Helping all Jewish teens find a program that matches their interest and needs becomes the goal, even if that match means a referral to another organization's program. Information sharing and cross-program referrals are a sign of a healthy, thriving Jewish teen ecosystem. Digital resources like a website or newsletter can be used for this but based on our experience with other community-wide teen initiatives, a professional network generates better results.

**Recommendation:** Find a way for teen program leaders to stay informed of one another's programs, preferably in person and informal.



It has been a privilege to observe and evaluate the bold venture that has been the Denver Boulder Jewish Teen Initiative. Thank you for the opportunity to work with the creative, skilled, caring individuals who have been the Initiative and grantee leaders over the years.



# Denver Boulder Jewish Teen Initiative Evaluation

## 2018–21

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### Overview for Jewish Student Connection

September 5, 2018

As the Denver Boulder Jewish Teen Initiative continues, Rose Community Foundation (the Foundation) is continuing to fund evaluation support for the four key Initiative grantees. In this next evaluation phase, the Initiative grantees will take on the responsibility of collecting and analyzing program data to demonstrate improved data collection processes and to build their internal capacity for program evaluation. Informing Change will provide technical assistance (TA) to grantees as they move through the learning and processes. That is, grantees will receive direct support and guidance to develop their own internal capacity to do ongoing program evaluation.

This approach to evaluation is different from Informing Change's role during the previous grant periods, when Informing Change provided external, third-party evaluation for the Initiative as a whole. In 2018–21, Informing Change's role will be to guide and support grantees in planning and conducting their own program evaluations. Informing Change will *not* be collecting or analyzing any of the grantees' data. Rather, we will be helping grantees figure out processes, systems, and a right-sized plan for collecting and analyzing data to understand progress toward stated outcomes.

Here we outline the components of our approach, including what we expect of grantees and what grantees can expect from Informing Change.

### ONSITE GRANTEE ASSESSMENTS

To better understand each grantee's existing capacity to collect, store, sort, and manage data related to enrollment and other outcomes, Senior Consultant Tina Cheplick will meet with each grantee organization in person at their offices. In addition to observing their data systems, Tina will lead a customized 60–90 minute TA workshop for each grantee designed around that organization's particular evaluation needs. These onsite assessments and TA sessions will take place in the early fall of 2018 and again in 2019.

### TECHNICAL ASSISTANCE TO GRANTEES

Following the onsite meetings, Senior Consultant Tina Cheplick will work with each grantee to ensure they have an evaluation workplan for collecting the data required by the Foundation-approved Outcomes Plan. The workplan will describe data collection methods; the audience for each method; a timeline for data collection, analysis, and reporting; and roles and responsibilities for specific staff within the organization for developing data collection tools, collecting and analyzing data and carrying out a successful program evaluation. Informing Change will review and provide advice on evaluation plans at the start of each grant year. The simple evaluation workplan will also be shared with the Foundation.

During the project's first year (2018–19), workplans will be finalized by October 31, 2018, and by August 31 in subsequent years.

During the project's first year (2018–19), Informing Change staff will also do the following for each grantee:

- Review participant enrollment forms in light of data collection needs, advise changes or upgrades, and approve the final forms. Each grantee is responsible for creating, revising, and finalizing their own enrollment or registration forms.
- Review data collection tools for participant outcomes (e.g., end-of-program survey), advise changes or upgrades, and approve final versions. Each grantee is responsible for creating, revising, and finalizing their own data collection tools.
- Provide TA and coaching as needed to support data collection, analysis, and reporting.
- Conduct a consultation session with each grantee in January or February to review mid-year data summaries.
- Conduct a year-end consultation session with each grantee to review final data before they are submitted to the Foundation.
- Assist grantees in preparing findings statements based on their program evaluation data, enrollment data, and intended outcomes and targets in the Outcomes Plan.
- Provide TA as needed to support grant report preparation.

In the second and third year of this project, Informing Change will provide the following for each grantee:

- A kick-off phone conversation to revisit the grantee's Outcomes Plan, noting relevant benchmarks and related evaluation capacity needs.
- Support for revising or updating the annual TA workplan, based on the evaluation needs and capacity discussed during the kick-off call.
- A review of the grantee's annual evaluation plan and updated participant enrollment forms.
- A review of each grantee's updated data collection tools for participant outcomes.
- Customized TA and coaching during data collection, analysis, and reporting.

## EXPECTATIONS OF GRANTEES

- Create a detailed, realistic evaluation workplan for collecting and analyzing the data required by the Foundation-approved Outcomes Plan.
- Share materials as requested by Informing Change, including drafts of the evaluation workplan, data collection tools, data summaries, and draft reports.
- Prepare for and participate in at least three consultation sessions each grant year—a discussion of the annual evaluation plan at the beginning of the year, a mid-year data review, and a year-end consultation session.
- Share evaluation plans and reports with Informing Change as requested prior to submitting them to the Foundation.
- Give serious consideration to Informing Change's advice and recommendations.
- Ask questions and ask for help when feeling confused or stuck.

## BUILDING GRANTEE DATA COLLECTION & ANALYSIS CAPACITIES

### Teen Enrollment Data

One key element of Initiative evaluations is learning about the individual teens who participate in grantee programs. Collecting, organizing, storing, and managing participant data, typically collected at the time of a teen's enrollment in a program or at their first event, is the responsibility of the grantees. Our TA will build grantees'

understanding that complete and reliable data about their participants is the foundation of an organization's evaluation capacity.

Prior to the start of each program year, we will review grantees' data collection tools (e.g., applications, sign-in sheets, parent questionnaires) to ensure they are collecting the data needed to answer the evaluation questions. Through our TA, we will help the grantees improve their ability to collect and manage this data.

### **Teen Surveys**

We expect that each year grantees will collect survey data directly from Jewish teens about their experiences to assess progress toward grantees' intended program outcomes. Our TA will include supporting grantees in developing or revising their surveys, providing advice on the administration of these surveys and on organizing the data for analysis, and helping with the interpretation of survey results. We will work with grantees to ensure the surveys will get the data and information they need.

During the second year of this project (2019–20), in accordance with the Initiative MOU with the Funder Collaborative, the grantees are responsible for working with the CCE team to conduct a teen survey. Grantees are expected to support the CCE team in conducting the survey, but survey administration and analysis are the responsibility of the CCE team. Our TA during this year will include helping each grantee identify and reduce overlapping or redundant data collection between their tools and the CCE survey questions.

### **Data Analysis**

We will coach the grantees in organizing, cleaning, and reviewing their enrollment data through a series of conversations.

To assist with analyzing the survey data, we will schedule calls to review and make meaning of grantees' survey results. Grantees will be responsible for creating data tables from their surveys and, if applicable, identifying initial themes in their qualitative data (e.g., interviews, open-ended survey questions).

Each grantee is now linked to an institutional support with IT or survey experience: Presentense and Moving Traditions with their national staff, Jewish Student Connection with JEWISHcolorado, and BJTI with the Boulder JCC. We expect these supports will help grantees create data tables and perhaps assist with some interpretation as well. One of our initial tasks will be to determine the extent to which these supports can provide this kind of assistance. This will help us determine how much further TA we should provide around synthesis and interpretation.

## **PROJECT REFLECTIONS & REPORTING**

We believe this project provides a framework for learning for the Foundation, the grantees, and perhaps other stakeholders in the Jewish teen landscape in Denver and Boulder. To support shared learning, we will provide the Foundation with reflection memos in lieu of annual or cumulative project reports. These reflection memos will be shared with grantees and will serve as the basis for evaluation updates and discussion during regular quarterly grantee convenings.

# Denver-Boulder Jewish Teen Initiative Theory of Change

**PURPOSE** To make greater Denver-Boulder area Jewish life relevant and meaningful to young people both now and later in their lives, with teens serving as active partners together with their peers, adults and community leaders in shaping their own Jewish journeys.

## ASSUMPTIONS & CONTEXT

- Effective Jewish development for teens has to include effective youth development more broadly. Teens develop their whole selves, not just their Jewish selves.
- Teens in the Denver-Boulder area have diverse interests and span a wide geographical area, so there cannot be a 'one-size-fits-all' approach to programming to engage teens. It is necessary to provide multiple options, particularly to reach the teens who have been less involved in Jewish life.
- Teens are in a formative stage of self-development, making this a prime time to reach them for impacting their lives as adults.
- Not all teens are benefitting from the existing offerings of Jewish programs and events, in part because they do not find them engaging, appealing or accessible.
- Denver and Boulder represent two distinct, but related communities. They share resources and connections but have different Jewish communities with different needs for their teens.
- Parents put less priority than earlier generations on their teens engaging in Jewish activities.
- The grantee programs in this initiative are part of the larger communities in Denver and Boulder but do not represent all of the opportunities for teens.

## ISSUES ADDRESSED

- Decline in teen involvement in Jewish life in the Denver-Boulder area
- Development needs of Jewish youth professionals and involved adults to successfully engage with teens and meet teens where they are
- Capacity of the Denver-Boulder Jewish community to successfully support teen engagement
- Community commitment to teen engagement
- Limited diversity of Jewish educational opportunities to meet teens' needs and interests

## TARGET AUDIENCES

Within the greater Denver-Boulder area:

- Middle school and high school teens from Jewish/interfaith<sup>1</sup> households, particularly those who have been un- or under-engaged in their Jewish communities
- Jewish youth professionals and adult volunteers working with Jewish/interfaith teens
- Jewish community leaders
- Current and potential future donors of Jewish teen programs

## STRATEGIES

- Scale innovative teen engagement models
- Pilot new, innovative teen engagement models
- Promote youth-initiated, youth-led ideas that engage teens and their peers in Jewish life
- Develop relationship-building and mentoring skills among Jewish youth professionals and involved adults
- Map, connect and track Jewish teen engagement opportunities
- Build community commitment to ongoing teen engagement

<sup>1</sup> We use the term "interfaith" to denote households that include Jewish and other backgrounds. We recognize that other terms and descriptions exist for these households and that the grantees may use different terminology in their work.

## OUTCOMES

### Engaging Jewish Teens

- Increase in Jewish opportunities for teens
- Increase in the number of teens involved in Jewish opportunities and the depth of their involvement
- Increase in the diversity of Jewish backgrounds of involved Jewish teens

### Developing Youth Professionals & Involved Adults

- Youth professionals and involved adults develop new, or improve existing, skills in mentoring and relationship-building approaches with teens
- Youth professionals and involved adults successfully utilize mentoring and relationship-building approaches with teens
- Increase in youth professionals' satisfaction with and commitment to working with Jewish teens

### Impacting Jewish Teens

- Jewish teens are more comfortable with the different ways to be Jewish

#### The Self Dimension

- Jewish teens have a stronger sense of self
- Jewish teens feel a sense of pride about being Jewish

#### The Knowledge Dimension

- Jewish teens have experienced learning that has been both challenging and valuable
- Jewish teens have learned things that enable them to be more active participants in the Jewish community (including rituals, Jewish history and sense of Jewish peoplehood)

#### The Time Dimension

- Jewish teens learn about and positively experience Jewish holidays and Shabbat

#### The Human Connected Dimension

- Jewish teens develop strong friendships
- Jewish teens develop significant relationships with

mentors, role models and educators

- Jewish teens are able to express their values and ethics in relation to Jewish principles and wisdom

#### The Spiritual Dimension

- Jewish teens develop the capacity (skills and language) that allows them to grapple with and express their spiritual journeys

#### The Communal Dimension

- Jewish teens feel connected to their various communities

#### The Jewish People Dimension

- Jewish teens develop the desire and commitment to be part of the Jewish people now and in the future
- Jewish teens develop a positive relationship to the land, people and State of Israel

#### The Global Dimension

- Jewish teens are inspired and empowered to make a positive difference in various communities and world in which they live

### Building Community Capacity to Support Teen Engagement

- Initiative-funded programs achieve specified outcomes and goals
- Active utilization of a community-wide system to gather and manage data on Jewish teen engagement
- Increase in strategies used to reach under-engaged Jewish teens
- Increase in active, effective partnerships among organizations working with Jewish teens
- Increase in synergy across components of the initiative
- Initiative components sustained financially through and beyond four years
- Teen-centric system for Jewish teen engagement prioritized by the community

## ULTIMATE IMPACT

Throughout their lives, every teen in the Denver-Boulder Jewish community can answer the question: How can my Judaism inform, inspire and advance the good I seek to do in the world?

# Summary of Findings from Sustainability Interviews

*January–February 2021*

MARCH 2021

*Prepared for  
Rose Community  
Foundation*

*Prepared by  
Informing Change*

## OVERVIEW

In January and February 2021, Informing Change conducted twelve key informant interviews for the Denver & Boulder Jewish Teen Initiative (DBJTI) to gain a better understanding of how community leaders and program leaders in the Jewish teen ecosystem perceive its strengths and gaps. The interview protocol followed a Sustainability Diagnostic Tool (SDT) developed by the national Jewish Teen Education and Engagement Funder Collaborative, which has supported DBJTI since 2014.

The SDT is designed to prompt reflections on the development and sustainability of Jewish teen education and engagement ecosystems across the country. The tool uses the term “ecosystem” to mean the full network of local Jewish organizations involved directly or peripherally with Jewish teen programming and engagement.

According to the stakeholders of Jewish teen programming in Denver and Boulder interviewed with the SDT, local teens and families have access to a variety of good, steady Jewish teen programming led by knowledgeable teen program leaders whose skillsets are good to excellent. Interviewees expressed some concerns about the ability of these programs to rebound quickly from the Covid-19 pandemic, particularly in regard to staffing. In general, however, stakeholders have a positive outlook for the short-term future of Jewish teen programming post-pandemic. There is less certainty about the longer-term future of quality programming for Jewish teens, and a lack of shared vision and shared commitment for ensuring quality teen programming for all of the Jewish teens of Denver and Boulder.

## METHOD OF DATA COLLECTION & ANALYSIS

Stakeholders for the interviews were selected by the evaluation team in consultation with Foundation staff. The twelve stakeholders represent a range of perspectives – they are teen program leaders, senior nonprofit vice-presidents and program supervisors, lay leaders of synagogues and nonprofits, synagogue education directors, and parents of teens. The majority have been active in the Denver and Boulder Jewish community for many years and were able to speak about changes over time. Of the 12 interviewees, five are in organizations that are part of the DBJTI, four had limited interaction with DBJTI through J-Hub between 2015-17, and three have had no formal interactions with DBJTI or J-Hub. Two of the twelve are involved exclusively in Boulder Jewish programs and organizations.

The interview protocol followed the SDT framework and guidance from the national Funder Collaborative’s evaluation team. A copy of the SDT framework is attached (see Appendix A). Our analysis of the interview data focused on whether or not there was evidence of the sustainability indicators laid out in the SDT. We aimed to answer the question: How, and how well, is the Jewish teen ecosystem in Denver and Boulder positioned for future sustainability?

## FINDINGS

### Steady Programming

The strength of the local Jewish teen ecosystem is within the programs themselves. Stakeholders describe the programs they know as high quality, attractive to teens and parents, and responsive to teen interests and needs. They describe and praise a wide range of programs and organizations, including synagogue education programs, camp programs, and youth engagement programs both within the DBJTI and non-Initiative programs. While not all programs are described as filled “to capacity,” there is a general sense that Jewish teen programming elicits enough interest from parents and teens to fill programs to a healthy level.



Relatedly, programs are thoughtful in the way they market to teens and parents. They make adjustments and aim to stay up to date on trends and platforms that catch teens' attention. They also pay attention to the need to differentiate marketing strategies for parents and their teens.

Many teen engagement programs are using successful models for teen leadership and teen-designed programming. There is a strong pattern of collecting teen input, training, and supporting teens for leadership roles, and using teen networking for peer recruitment. Some programs that use established curricula with fewer options for teen-designed programs invest in their group leader training, to ensure opportunities for teen voice where possible and teen-led conversations about the curriculum.

## Support & Training for Teen Professionals

The quality of a teen program and the likelihood of repeat participation by teens and families are heavily dependent on the skillset and personality of the Jewish educator or teen professional running the program. Stakeholders see both strengths and weaknesses in this aspect of Jewish teen programs and the larger ecosystem as a whole.

Stakeholders say—usually in reference to the programs they know best—that there are excellent, well-trained teen professionals and group leaders running teen programs. They are less confident that other programs have such high-quality staff, sometimes citing specific situations and examples. Stakeholders do not see any community-wide effort to ensure teen professionals possess or develop the kinds of skillsets and knowledge necessary to work well with teens. Organizations with national affiliations direct their teen professionals to national and regional trainings for skill building.

The question of whether the community has an adequate number of teen professionals received mixed responses. Some interviewees believe the roster of Jewish teen professionals depends on too many part-time, low-paid positions. In addition, some cited evidence that the pandemic has resulted in increased workloads for teen professionals in several organizations as they cover staff vacancies and reassignments, further reducing the hours available for teen programming within their paid weekly hours. Relatedly, there are concerns about teen-facing staff turnover—even organizations with an adequate number of quality teen professionals may be burning out these staff with high workloads, difficult schedules, and enrollment expectations.

Based on their observations at individual organizations, interviewees believe that supervisors encourage teen professionals' development. Though there does not appear to be an aligned, community-wide strategy for supporting teen professionals' development, most stakeholders observe that supervisors of teen professionals encouraged participation in professional development opportunities—that is, when teen professionals could find those opportunities.

## Identified Gaps in the Ecosystem

In contrast to the pattern of many positive comments about individual programs, stakeholders had little to offer as evidence of cross-program, community-level ecosystem development. Three key elements of long-term sustainability emerged as gaps: partnerships, leadership, and shared vision and goals.

- **Partnerships & Collaborations.** Some partnerships between teen programs exist, but on a small scale or as a vendor relationship (e.g., a specialty program like a camp and a more general program sharing resources or co-marketing). Stakeholders believe that not enough is being done to form and sustain strategic cross-program partnerships that could be mutually beneficial for the teen programs and for individual educators, and that could strengthen, expand, or innovate existing programming.



Most stakeholders expressed a desire for an organizing group to bring teen professionals together occasionally to share information and learn about one another's programs. A secondary interest is to have this group identify the types of learning or professional development of immediate interest to teen professionals and help organize activities to match these short-term interests. Several stakeholders referred to the learning group of early childcare professionals as an example of how regular peer gatherings can strengthen relationships, provide learning opportunities, and give professionals a sense of being seen and supported by the larger Jewish community.

- **Leadership.** No stakeholders believe the Jewish teen ecosystem has intentional leadership, although a few whose organizations participate in the DBJTI can name some individuals they consider leaders with a vision beyond their own program. Almost all can identify a couple strong leaders of individual program and some refer to supportive lay leaders and executive leaders, but there is a perception of little to no ecosystem leadership. This is not surprising, given that stakeholders also described the connections across teen programs as light, loose, and occasional.

One stakeholder points out that the logical pool from which to draw and build leadership for the teen ecosystem is the roster of teen professionals themselves. However, as we have learned in evaluations of other Jewish teen initiatives, this group is known for burnout and rapid turnover and typically comprises entry-level positions in larger organizations. Younger teen professionals frequently describe a lack of support to advance on a career pathway within the Jewish community. It is unrealistic to expect sustainable leadership to appear in this group without convening opportunities (as noted earlier in this memo) to help identify, recognize, and nurture future leadership for the field.

- **Shared Vision & Goals.** Accompanying the perceived gap in ecosystem level leadership, stakeholders are not aware of a shared vision or set of common goals across teen programs, neither in Denver nor Boulder. Some community leaders assume various teen programs must have goals in common, despite the differences in their program, and believe teen professionals can infer a shared purpose around teen and education engagement in Jewish life. However, it is clear that in the eyes of the larger community the Jewish teen ecosystem has not agreed on or articulated a shared mission or shared goals. Organizations work hard to stand out and offer unique programming but focusing on these differences between programs can also undermine the sense that all organizations are working together to support Denver and Boulder teens.
- Stakeholders do not believe there is a clear and coherent roadmap for the community's future as an ecosystem. Several interviewees identified the lack of an infrastructure to keep teen professionals connected—even something informal like monthly roundtables—as contributing to this gap.

Stakeholders associated with JEWISHcolorado (JCo) programs have a more positive view of shared goals, possibly because their teen program design depends on partnerships with a wide range of Jewish communal organizations.

## Funding Uncertainty

When discussing sustainability of a nonprofit program, most people think first of funding. The SDT framework usefully points out other aspects of structure and planning that contribute to sustainability. However, addressing the question of future funding is central to securing sustainability, whether for an individual program or for a group of programs that make up a community's Jewish teen ecosystem.

The Denver and Boulder communities are at a disadvantage right now in envisioning shared funding strategies for the ecosystem, for three reasons. First, several Jewish teen programs in both communities are struggling to generate funding or allocate organizational funds to ensure their own minimal operations for the next couple

years. Second, information about one another's future plans and funding are rarely shared across organizations and programs. Half of the informants were unable to make any comment on the future financial viability of the overall teen ecosystem. Third, the staff cuts and other organizational disruptions caused by the Covid-19 pandemic are further clouding the picture of what resources might be available for teen programs in the near future.

Still, it is worth looking at two of the SDT indicators for funding security to understand the funding challenges facing the current set of programs now serving Denver and Boulder Jewish teens:

- **Diverse and numerous funding sources.** Stakeholders do not describe a funding landscape of many small and large funders in the Denver and Boulder area. Most say there are few local foundations or donors interested in funding teen programs. One stakeholder, for example, says they do not know any funders in the area besides Rose Community Foundation and JCo. Several say they must draw on national funding sources through their national organization to sustain their program.
- **Diversified revenue strategies at the program level.** Most of the programs known to the stakeholders we interviewed depend on budget allocations from a parent organization. A few receive teen-restricted program grants from foundations; those receiving DBJTI grants acknowledge this funding is unusual and extraordinary in size, scope, flexibility, and long-term investment, compared to other foundation grants. A few programs have earned income from program fees, and most conduct donor solicitation to some degree. No stakeholder knew of any long-term financial plan at the program level aimed at teen program sustainability.

## IMPLICATIONS & RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the findings from this sustainability diagnostic, the Denver and Boulder communities can feel moderately comfortable about the quality, responsiveness, and likely sustainability of programs for Jewish teens. Across the two communities, program by program, there will continue to be ups and downs in program quality, outreach and enrollment, and sustainability. Without a centralized group promoting and advocating for Jewish teen engagement and education, however, the overall diversity and reach of program offerings is unlikely to change. And despite stakeholders' comfort with the status quo, generating support for future teen programming will be more difficult if communal leaders, let alone the broader Jewish community, cannot articulate shared goals and a common vision for Jewish teen engagement and education.

In our evaluations of other community-wide Jewish teen initiatives, we have seen that the Jewish teen professionals and teen leaders form the underpinning of successful teen engagement. Fortunately for the Denver and Boulder Jewish ecosystem, there is much enthusiasm among those we interviewed for building a community of Jewish youth professionals for mutual support, greater learning, and finding ways to work cooperatively toward shared goals. Whether a teen group leader or a lay leader just observing the work, across the different perspectives, stakeholders acknowledge the benefits of connecting teen professionals to one another and supporting their learning and shared work.

Recommendations for future:

- Consider ways to support networking and shared learning for Jewish teen professionals. Whether regular roundtables, casual convenings, or a formal learning community, these types of routine gatherings have been shown to facilitate the development of a cohesive Jewish teen ecosystem and help youth professionals feel supported by the larger Jewish community. Gatherings that facilitate networking, sharing information, and short-term learning (e.g., speakers, panels, workshops) seem to match the current needs of the ecosystem rather than formal professional development courses and training series.

- Engage Jewish community leaders (e.g., CEOs, synagogue leaders, lay leaders) in a conversation about shared goals for educating and engaging Jewish teens. Find a way to connect, even if only once every one or two years, how different organizations' missions and visions include Jewish teens and teen activities. This kind of intentional conversation focused on teens, even if only occasional, can motivate and guide program leaders to identify and work on shared goals.
- Consider leveraging organizations' success with teen leadership for a community-wide planning assignment that could support shared goals and elevate the community's awareness of and interest in Jewish teen engagement and education. Stakeholders in these interviews see the value of having teens act as leaders and planners, and their comments confirm that the teen programs are developing some teens' skills for such roles.
- As the Covid-19 pandemic recedes, step forward to ask questions and build understanding about whether and how the pandemic has disrupted and changed the Jewish teen ecosystem. In addition to the numerous staff layoffs and program restructuring, there have been bursts of teen leadership, program creativity, and greater connectivity through online and video tools. An intentional inventory and reflection about what was lost and gained holds potential for strengthening and perhaps reimagining the Jewish teen ecosystem.

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# Youth Mental Health First Aid Survey Key Findings

MARCH 2021

*Prepared for*  
Rose Community  
Foundation

*Prepared by*  
Informing Change

## INTRODUCTION

Youth Mental Health First Aid (YMHFA) is a skills-based training program of the National Council on Behavioral Health designed to teach youth group leaders, educators, school staff, and others who regularly interact with young people how to help an adolescent (age 12–18) who is experiencing a mental health or addiction challenge or is in crisis. As part of the Jewish Teen Funder Collaborative, the Denver Boulder Jewish Teen Initiative was able to offer the training to youth educators in the region. Trainers from the Collaborative provide the unique opportunity for training participants to view the information and guidance of the training through a Jewish lens. The training was offered to Denver and Boulder Jewish professionals at various times during 2020.

Working with Rose Community Foundation and Margie Bogdanow, Informing Change developed a survey to capture how YMHFA training participants are applying what they have learned in their work with Jewish youth, along with assessing the community needs around youth mental health supports and resources.

This memo summarizes themes from the YMHFA survey results and offers thoughts on how the Denver and Boulder Jewish communities can work to further support the mental health and well-being of teens.

### Methodology

Between January 11 and February 9, 2021, Informing Change administered a 16-question survey that included questions about YMHFA learnings, the availability of mental health services in Denver-Boulder, and organizational support and resources available to youth professionals. The survey was sent to 92 Jewish youth professionals in the Denver-Boulder area.<sup>1</sup> After removing responses containing no data and duplicates, we had survey data from 49 individuals—42 complete responses and 7 partial responses. Of the 49, 40 had attended a YMHFA training and 9 responded to the survey without having had the YMHFA training experience. For the demographic makeup of the survey respondents, please see Appendix A-1.

For analysis, we first looked at the descriptive frequencies of each question. Then, we looked at crosstabs of certain key questions by different demographic groups (for example, level of experience, gender, role) to assess any differences. Finally, we coded and summarized all open-ended survey questions.

## KEY FINDINGS

### YMHFA Training Learnings

The Jewish youth professionals who attended the YMHFA training left it feeling more competent and confident about responding to mental health challenges in the youth they work with. Over 80% of survey respondents feel better **able to recognize signs and symptoms** of mental health challenges in the youth they work with, and feel **more confidence reaching out to, talking, and interacting with youth** going through a mental health challenge (Exhibit 1).

A smaller majority (about two-thirds) agree that they are **better able to support youth** going through a mental health challenge, but a greater portion of respondents were neutral compared to the items mentioned above. We observed a similar pattern in the survey responses about participants **sharing learnings from the training with colleagues** at their organizations. In an open-ended response, two participants note that the training prompted them to have wider conversations with their staff or change processes at their organization. Specifically, they describe developing systems to support youth as challenges arise, as well as shifting their program structure to better mitigate these challenges.

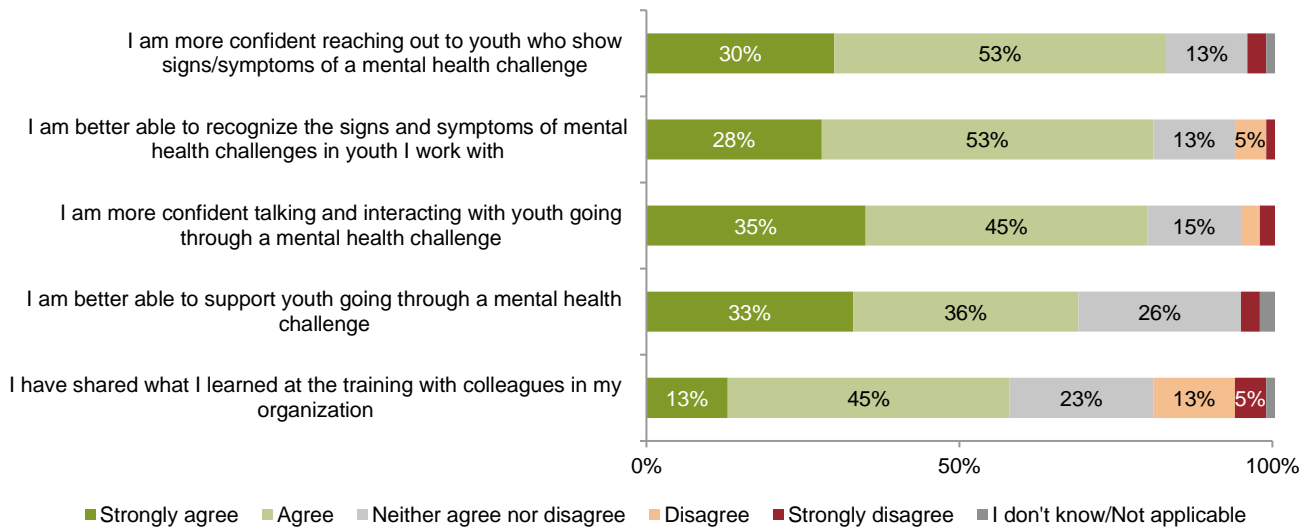
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<sup>1</sup> We received 4 bounced emails, reducing the total population size to 88.

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### Changes in participants after YMHFA training

Exhibit 1 | n=39-40

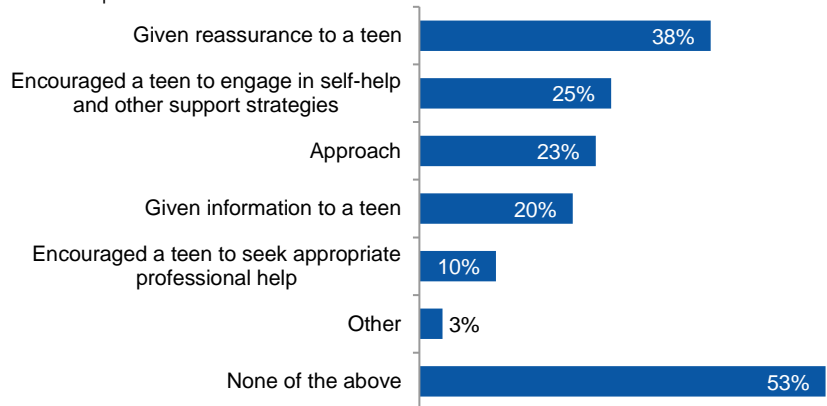


As part of our analysis, we compared responses to these questions between different demographic groups. In general, respondents with five or more years of experience as a Jewish educator agree more often with these statements compared to those with four years of experience or less.<sup>2</sup> This is also true for men compared to women,<sup>3</sup> and for respondents with the role of Rabbi, Director of Education, or Day School teacher compared to those holding other types of roles.<sup>4</sup>

It is unclear to what extent respondents who took the training have been able to apply what they learned to their work so far. Over half of respondents had not utilized any of the steps in the ALGEE action plan<sup>5</sup> yet (Exhibit 2). This may be expected, considering how recently some respondents have completed the training. Of the ALGEE action steps, the three that respondents most commonly say they have utilized so far in their work with Jewish teens are giving reassurance to a teen, encouraging a teen to engage in self-help, and the approach.

### ALGEE plan steps applied since the training

Exhibit 2 | n=40



For the most part, respondents seem to find the content of the training useful. Almost all participants (88%) think the YMHFA training skills they learned were either somewhat relevant or very relevant to their work with Jewish youth. In the open-ended responses, participants describe the training as impacting their work in three ways. First, respondents note increased awareness of the signs of a youth mental health challenge. Second, many

<sup>2</sup> Due to the small sample size, we were not able to test the statistical significance of these differences. Any differences mentioned in this memo are merely observed.

<sup>3</sup> There is a slightly higher portion of women with four years of experience or less compared to men and compared to the other levels of experience.

<sup>4</sup> Roles in the second group: Educator/Teacher, Program Director, Youth Director, Youth Group Advisor, Assistant Director, Camp Counselor, Volunteer, Other.

<sup>5</sup> The ALGEE action plan is a tool for providing mental health first aid.

participants note that the training provided a boost to their confidence, particularly their confidence to act in response to a mental health challenge. Third, others note that the training reaffirmed knowledge, ideas, or practices related to mental health that they already had in place. More generally, some respondents described the training as important and helpful overall, without providing much additional detail.

Overall, respondents who work with youth either at the middle school or high school grade level found the skills slightly more relevant than their colleagues working with elementary school aged youth and younger. While it might not help them directly in their day-to-day jobs, most of these participants working with younger children or students still felt the training was useful and insightful. There was one participant who noted that some of the themes in the training, such as suicide, were too intense for the age group that they work with.

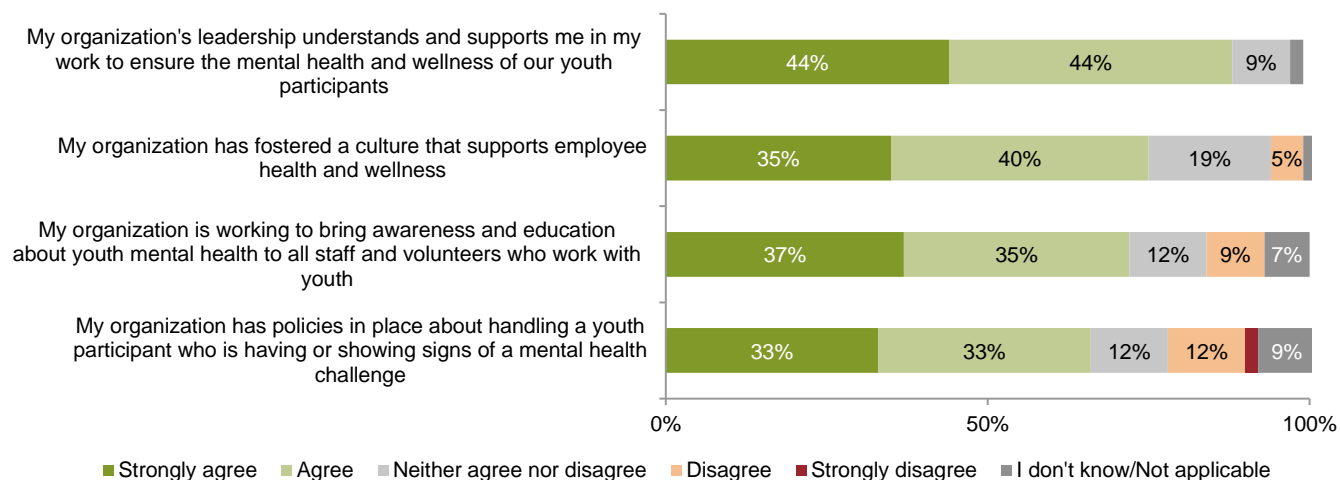
Respondents who had five or more years of experience, who are men, or who hold the role of Rabbi, Director of Education, or Day School teacher also seem to find the training more relevant compared to those who have less experience, are women, or have other roles in their organization.

### Organizational Capacity

Respondents generally seem to feel supported by their primary organization in their work around the mental well-being of youth. Almost all respondents say their organization’s leadership **understands and supports them in their work** related to the mental health and wellness of youth participants (Exhibit 3). Almost three-quarters of respondents agree that their organization is **trying to bring awareness and education about youth mental health** to all staff/volunteers working with youth. Slightly fewer respondents (66%) agree that their **organization has policies around handling youth going through mental health challenges**. Almost one-fifth said they didn’t know or that this question was not applicable to them.

#### How Jewish educators view the capacities of their organizations related to mental health and wellness

Exhibit 3 | n=43



Educators and other professionals who work with youth also feel like their own wellness is supported by their organization. Three-quarters of respondents said that their **organization fosters a culture that supports employee health and wellness**.

Compared to respondents who did not, respondents who did attend the YMHFA training agreed more often with the statement that their organization is working to bring awareness and education about youth mental health to all of their staff and volunteers. Respondents with four years of experience or less also agreed with this statement more often; they also agreed more often that their organization has policies in place around youth with mental health challenges and that their organization supports employee health and wellness.



## Community Services & Resources

Many respondents indicated competency around connecting youth with mental health help and resources in the local Denver-Boulder community. A majority of respondents agree or strongly agree that **they know how to connect youth with appropriate help and resources** and that they **feel comfortable** doing so (Exhibit 4).

### Assessment of Denver-Boulder mental health resources and services

Exhibit 4 | n=45



Comparatively fewer respondents answered strongly agree in regard to **knowing what services are available for those experiencing mental health challenges in Denver and Boulder**, but, overall, the majority still agree or strongly agree. Similarly, it seems as though fewer respondents know **how easy it is to access these services in the area**; a larger percentage were either neutral or answered “I don’t know” in response to that question compared to previous items.

Respondents who attended the YMHFA training agree more often with all of the survey items related to local services compared to respondents who did not attend the training. Respondents with four years of experience or less are less comfortable connecting teens to mental health services and resources. They also agree less often that they know what mental health services are available. Compared to women, men agree more often that they know how to connect youth to help or resources, and that they feel comfortable connecting teens to services and resources.

In response to questions about what additional resources or supports Jewish educators need to better care for the mental health and well-being of the Jewish teens they work with and what the broader Jewish community in Denver-Boulder could do to support its teens, a few themes rose to the surface.

Respondents resoundingly want some type of **resource guide**. They mention signs that could be posted around schools, resource sheets to share with teen providers in the area, and resource sheets that are updated regularly. Other suggestions include disseminating a list of local resources, setting up a helpline that youth can call, and creating materials that youth can engage with before the onset of a crisis.

**More trainings and more people trained** is another theme that emerged. Two individuals mentioned that it could be beneficial for more people in the community to receive trainings like the YMHFA training or engage in conversations around youth mental health to increase awareness in all spaces that teens participate in. One-third of respondents expressed that it would be beneficial to **increase the level of coordination, training, and awareness-raising** among the various stakeholders that make up the ecosystem of Jewish teen education.

Suggestions range from tapping into existing youth-serving organizations to provide training to working directly with parents hosting large, community-wide events.

One-quarter of participants emphasized that providing youth-serving programs and organizations with **increased opportunities for trainings, professional development, and resources** would be most beneficial in supporting youth mental health and well-being. Specific suggestions include bringing in outside experts to speak at youth-serving organizations, continuing the trainings regularly due to high turnover, increasing the amount of training, and increasing investment. Five participants suggested **engaging directly with youth** through teen-leader trainings, creating a confidential buddy system, or by increasing the number of activities or events that youth can attend to prevent mental health challenges.

Other themes mentioned less often were **increased access to mental health professionals**, both in the workplace and at youth-facing programs. A few respondents mentioned that it would be useful to have access to mental health professionals in their workplaces. Two participants specifically noted that access to mental health professionals that understand Jewish culture would be important. Four participants mentioned having mental health professionals or additional youth-serving professionals on-site at youth-facing programs, such as psychologists, counselors, social workers, and coaches. One person mentioned creating a forum for sharing personal stories for those that are comfortable and want to help raise awareness.

## IMPLICATIONS OF FINDINGS

Participants in the YMHFA training have gained skills and confidence that are enhancing the well-being of Jewish teens in Denver and Boulder. Further, these Jewish youth educators are raising awareness with colleagues in their organizations. In general, the respondents to this survey indicate a comfort and readiness to draw on internal policies and procedures at their organization for support, as well as external mental health resources in the community. This is good news for Jewish teens and families in Denver and Boulder, but the survey results also raise possible next steps to support these and other Jewish professionals and volunteers who work with teens:

- Consider ways to help more Jewish organizations 1) bring awareness of and education about youth mental health to all staff and volunteers working with youth and 2) develop organizational policies and procedures that support staff or volunteers who engage with youth experiencing mental health challenges.
- Expand awareness and knowledge of the types of youth mental health services available in the Denver and Boulder area and how teens and youth leaders can access them.
- Encourage and support the development of an affinity group for Jewish youth educators interested in continuing the conversation on supporting youth mental health in Denver and Boulder.
- Consider what additional guidance should be given to organizations when selecting who from their organization will attend a mental health training—specifically around the age or grade-level with which the educators work.

# Appendix A-1: Survey Respondent Demographics

The following data tables represent the demographic makeup of the respondents who took the Youth Mental Health First Aid survey.

<b>How many years have you worked as a Jewish educator? (n=42)</b>	<b>Count</b>	<b>Percent</b>
Less than one year	3	7%
1–4 years	4	10%
5–9 years	13	31%
10–14 years	5	12%
15–19 years	4	10%
20 or more years	13	31%

<b>In which county or counties do you work as a Jewish educator? (Select all that apply) (n=42)</b>	<b>Count</b>	<b>Percent</b>
Adams County	1	2%
Arapahoe County	5	12%
Boulder County	9	21%
Broomfield County	2	5%
Denver County	35	83%
Douglas County	2	5%
Jefferson County	3	7%
Other county/counties not listed	2	5%

**Other responses: In which county or counties do you work as a Jewish educator? (n=2)**

N/A
Serve campers statewide

<b>Which of the following reflects your role in working with Jewish teens? (Select all that apply) (n=42)</b>	<b>Count</b>	<b>Percent</b>
Congregational Rabbi or Cantor	4	10%
Director of Education	10	24%
Educator/Teacher	17	40%
Day School Teacher	5	12%

<b>Which of the following reflects your role in working with Jewish teens? (Select all that apply) (n=42)</b>	<b>Count</b>	<b>Percent</b>
Program Director	12	29%
Youth Director	4	10%
Youth Group Advisor	4	10%
Assistant Director	3	7%
Camp Counselor	1	2%
Volunteer	4	10%
Other	4	10%

**Other responses: Which of the following reflects your role in working with Jewish teens? (n=4)**

Programmer/facilitator for teen educators
Regional director for national Jewish organization
Technical Support
I do not directly work with that age.

<b>[If selected "Educator/Teacher" or "Day School Teacher"] Which grade(s) do you teach? (Select all that apply) (n=20)</b>	<b>Count</b>	<b>Percent</b>
Pre-K	2	10%
Kindergarten	2	10%
1st grade	3	15%
2nd grade	2	10%
3rd grade	6	30%
4th grade	4	20%
5th grade	5	25%
6th grade	10	50%
7th grade	11	55%
8th grade	10	50%
9th grade	8	40%
10th grade	8	40%
11th grade	8	40%
12th grade	7	35%

<b>[If “Day School Teacher” NOT selected] Which of the following best describes the setting(s) where you work in the field of Jewish education and engagement? (Select all that apply) (n=28)</b>	<b>Count</b>	<b>Percent</b>
Camp (day or overnight)	6	21%
Congregation, synagogue, or synagogue movement	7	25%
Jewish day school	7	25%
Jewish supplementary/religious school	4	14%
Social action/service organization	4	14%
Youth movement	5	18%
Other Jewish communal organization	9	32%
Other (Please specify):	2	7%

**Other responses: [If “Day School Teacher” NOT selected] Which of the following best describes the setting(s) where you work in the field of Jewish education and engagement? (n=2)**

University Students - Hillel

Israel Trip

<b>With which gender do you identify? (n=42)</b>	<b>Count</b>	<b>Percent</b>
Female	28	67%
Male	13	31%
N/A	1	2%

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