



Click here to learn more about the American Hebrew Academy



March 24, 2011
Volume 229 Issue 25
Jewish EXPONENT

Subscribe to our weekly newsletter:

[Subscribe](#)

- [Subscribe](#)
- [Advertising](#)
- [About](#)
- [Q&A](#)
- [Contact](#)
- [Search](#)
- [Classifieds](#)
- [Personals](#)

↓ Sections > Cover Page



Family Foundations Get Innovative

March 24, 2011 - [Bryan Schwartzman](#), Staff Writer

The architects of a new charitable partnership are not only hoping to dramatically improve how the Jewish community serves families with special needs, they're also seeking to shake up how big-league private philanthropy is practiced in the region.



Gateways offers Jewish education to children with special needs in the Boston area. Jay Ruderman, whose family foundation helps fund the organization, is set to meet here with funders of a new special-needs initiative.

The idea behind the Venture Philanthropy Partnership is to devote significant resources to areas that have been traditionally underfunded by Jewish organizations. Currently, the partnership is comprised of six families with mega-funds to donate, working in concert with the Jewish Federation of Greater Philadelphia.

While cooperation among charitable foundations is nothing new, the scope of this collaboration marks a new chapter for the local Jewish community, representing what is believed to be the largest effort yet at bringing together different funding sources for what is known as venture philanthropy.

The concept -- a play on the profit-oriented practice of venture capitalism -- focuses on the creation and nurturing of new, innovative programs, rather than funding existing programs with long track records.

Ira Saligman, a board member of the Robert Saligman Charitable Trust, one of the local partners, is slated to speak about the birth of what they are calling the VPP, and it's initial focus on special-needs programs, at the annual conference of the Jewish Funders Network, an organization that brings together private Jewish philanthropists, and is meeting next week in Philadelphia.

The VPP is just one of a number of philanthropic models and initiatives that will be discussed at the three-day gathering, which begins on March 27 and will focus on helping family foundations become more involved in projects they currently support, as well as possibly fostering the next great idea to transform Jewish life.

Saligman said his talk will center on how donors need to



Ira Saligman

[Add JE on Facebook](#)

[Follow JE on Twitter](#)

A Community Remembers: Death Notices February 2011
[Click to View >>](#)

Sponsored By:
JOSEPH Levine & SONS
 Funeral Home

INSIDE MAGAZINE
 spring & summer
[Click to View >>](#)

View All Supplements
[Click to View >>](#)

See **MATISYAHU** live!
 Jewish Heritage Night
 WED, MAR. 30 ★ 7PM

CHAGALL: A BIO OF THE MAN BEHIND THE ART
 MARC CHAGALL
 JONATHAN WILSON
 'ELEGANTLY WRITTEN AND BLUNTLY HONEST'
 -PHILADELPHIA INQUIRER
 nextbook PRESS SCHOCKEN

change their approach from "checkbook philanthropy" -- simply writing a check to a worthy cause -- to "venture philanthropy," which entails getting knee-deep into an endeavor.

"When we perfect the model, it should be applicable across the community for different needs and across the country in different regions," said Saligman. "Philanthropy, for me, is finding out where I want to make a difference -- not by finding a great cause, but by orchestrating something to happen."

Dr. Maury Hoberman, a longtime trustee of the Lasko Family Foundation, which spearheaded the partnership, said those involved "felt there were opportunities in the Jewish community to bring foundations and individual funders together to develop strategies to support needs in the community that weren't already being supported."

In addition to the Lasko and Saligman foundations, the VPP's participants include the Sally Cooper Bleznak Philanthropic Fund, Saba Chai Five Foundation, Stein Family Foundation, and the Shuster and Norry philanthropic foundations.

The VPP's first project is focused squarely on the issue of special needs in the Jewish community.

The group has awarded a \$300,000 grant to the Jewish Family and Children's Service of Greater Philadelphia to create a web-based resource center, which they are hoping to launch in December. It will primarily serve Jewish families with special needs, culling information from 10 local Jewish agencies, who are partnering with the initiative to contribute information to a searchable database.

The project will also fund social workers who can offer direct assistance and case management, tracking the progress of individuals and families over an extended period of time.

The special-needs initiative stems from research done by the Auerbach Central Agency for Jewish Education that was commissioned by the Lasko Foundation, according to Ilana Dean Schmidt, a part-time consultant hired to manage the VPP.

That research, conducted by Deborah Gettes, found that the vast majority of families with special-needs members felt ignored by the Jewish community and didn't know where to turn for reliable information.

Funding an initiative to remedy that was going to take more resources than the Lasko Foundation had available, so they sought out other partners, said Schmidt.

Rabbi Margot Stein, a trustee of the Allen A. Stein Family Foundation, a funder of the project, proved a good fit. "I am personally passionate about the cause of special needs. As a rabbi, I spend a great deal of my time tutoring kids with special needs."

Stein is also the mother of an autistic child and said that, at times, she hasn't known where to turn for the help she needed.

The idea of venture philanthropy is, in many ways, an outgrowth of a long-term trend toward more direct donor engagement.

That's been a major reason why Federation, for instance, has received an increasing amount of gifts earmarked for specific projects in recent years.

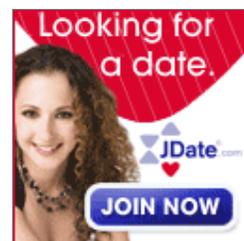
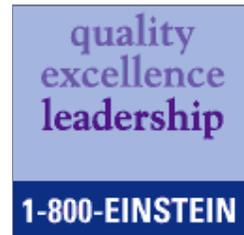
According to Hoberman of the Lasko foundation, while the VPP is set up as a public charity and can legally accept donations of any size, it won't be soliciting contributions in the way a typical nonprofit does.

From the Ground Up

They are not only looking for foundations to bring in large dollar amounts -- a number of the players involved have pledged \$75,000 so far to the special-needs project, though some are contributing less -- but they are also seeking participants who are willing to devote a lot of time to help shape future projects from the ground up, said Hoberman.

Schmidt, who oversaw foundation relations for Federation and now directs major gifts for

Ilana Saligman



Jewish Family and Children's Service, said that the VPP is still immersed in the special-needs initiative, so it is not clear what, or when, it will pick as its next funding area.

She said that the idea for the next target area will originate with the venture partners themselves, but added that having Federation at the table will help them determine which areas have been funded and which have not.

Ira M. Schwartz, Federation's CEO, said the central fundraising agency was asked to be a partner in the VPP, and he said it has committed \$75,000 over the three years.

Though special needs is not one of Federation's core funding areas, he said, Federation leadership saw the initiative as an important project, one that it could support without serving as a driving force.

Schwartz also said that Federation has teamed up with family foundations in the past, citing as an example its partnership with the Neubauer Family Foundation to fund overnight-camping scholarships.

Hardly the First Time Involved

While it may be new to Philadelphia, this is hardly the first time that private family foundations have gotten into the joint venture business, according to Jeffrey Solomon, president of the New York-based Andrea and Charles Bronfman Philanthropies.

In fact, a decade ago, the Bronfman Foundation, along with the Steinhardt Foundation for Jewish Life, along with others, helped create what might be the best known of all Jewish venture initiatives -- Birthright Israel, which provides free trips to Israel for young adults.

Solomon said that if the VPP turns out to be a true venture philanthropic fund, it can help change the culture of charity in the region by infusing it with a greater tolerance for risk, as well as setting clear measurements for success.

"Those are things philanthropy has not been very good at," he said.

Jay Ruderman, president of the Boston-based Ruderman Family Foundation, has established a national philanthropic consortium looking at ways to fund special needs in the Jewish community. He said he plans to meet with VPP members at the funders conference next week.

Ruderman said that the emergence of the VPP is just the latest evidence that the Jewish community -- with both private funds and public charities -- is increasingly approaching their work from a business perspective, even as they deal with the long-term effects of the recession.

"It behooves us to work in this way," said Ruderman, who lives in Israel. "Philanthropists are not looking at a particular project, they are looking for creative, intelligent ways to change their community."

[Also See: Finding Ways to Reach Younger Givers](#)

[For These Young Philanthropists, Giving Is a Natural Part of Life](#)

See more articles in: [Cover Page](#)