

Ukraine Trip Reinforces the Impact of the BJF Community

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Samantha Dubinsky, the Birmingham Jewish Federation's Director of Community Impact, is in Ukraine for a few days. She is part of a group of Jewish Federation professionals and volunteer leaders who are spending several days in Ukraine and then traveling to Israel. Trip members are learning about needs facing Ukraine's Jews and what programs funded by Jewish Federations are doing to help. In addition, the group is learning strategies for fundraising. The group is staying in Kyiv in western Ukraine. Samantha is pictured here meeting with an elderly Jewish woman who receives benefits from the Federation-funded JDC. Below is Samantha's report from her first full day on the trip.

KYIV, UKRAINE -I was wrong. Let me explain why. But first consider these few questions. If you could only take a few items from your house, would you be able to name those items quickly? What if you had to do that while bombs went off in the background? What if everything that was precious to you had to be carried in your two hands? The above questions may sound dramatic, but they are questions that Ukrainian Jews living near the conflict in Crimea have had to ask themselves over the past few years. In 2014, when the conflict first started, Ukraine was in the headlines consistently. Now, even though the conflict is still raging (as recently as February, 2017 fighting broke out), we don't hear as much about Ukraine. Let me tell you, there is still much to be heard. I anticipated that this trip to Ukraine, in comparison to the Federation trip I took to Ukraine in 2015, would be a completely different experience. I even wrote about expecting it to be different in Sunday's Update. While the setting is different (before I was in Dnipro -a city close to the conflict that still looks as though it belongs in the Soviet Union - and now I am in Kyiv, the capital of Ukraine and a metropolis), the very harsh reality of danger, conflict and unrest is still there. The Ukrainian Jewish community needs our help. Today, our group of Jewish professionals and volunteer leaders from around the US heard from IDPs (Internally Displaced Persons) who fled the conflict zone in 2014 and 2015 and are still rebuilding their lives as they have resettled in Kyiv. Some of them were lawyers, professors and doctors with successful careers who lost everything when the conflict began. Now, they are trying to pick up the pieces left behind by this conflict that doesn't seem to be ending anytime soon. One woman who spoke about fleeing her home said that she quickly packed two bags full of her most valued possessions, only to realize that she could take just one if she wanted to hold her child's hand as they searched for safety. Everything she had accumulated in her life - degrees from schools, furniture, family photos - was gone in an instant. And she, with her bag and her son, were left without a home. In 2015, I heard stories of IDPs and the unsettling circumstances they were starting their new lives in so I thought I would be prepared for what I was going to hear on this current trip. But the stories today made me realize how much this community is still struggling. I'm not sure what I expected, but I thought that this trip would reveal a Ukraine that is healing and rebuilding itself. That is happening to a degree, thanks to the Federation-funded Israel-based Jewish Agency and the Federation-funded Joint Distribution Committee, but there is still so much work to do.

Thanks to the Jewish Agency and the JDC, Ukrainian Jews who have been displaced are making lives for themselves, either in Ukraine if they choose to stay or in Israel if they choose to leave. There are few social services in Ukraine so the assistance that Ukrainian Jews receive comes largely from

Federations such as ours through the JDC and Jewish Agency. If not for these two organizations, or our donor dollars, many of these people would be without the basic necessities - a home, food and water. **PETITE BUT FEISTY** We were able to see what the JDC is doing for Ukrainian Jews today when we made a home visit to a 96-year-old woman's apartment. This woman hasn't left her apartment in four years because she broke her hip and, while JDC helped provide her with the medical attention she needed, she still has pain and is nervous about falling again. She was petite, but feisty, especially for 96-years-old and welcomed us into her aging apartment with open arms. Not receiving many visitors, this woman was delighted to entertain us and to tell us a little bit about her life. She lived through the Holocaust, a Communist regime, the fall of the former Soviet Union, all the while dedicating herself to teaching. She retired just 16 years ago at age 80. As we prepared to leave her apartment, this woman thanked us in an unusual way. She had been anticipating our visit for over a week and made each of us a card. On the card, in Russian, it says If we all hold hands together, we will never be lonely. Handing us each this lovely card was all she needed to do to express her gratitude. And, that's why the Federation movement exists. We are a movement dedicated to the idea that if there are Jews in need anywhere in the world, we will be there to help them. We are certainly helping in Ukraine, but there's still much more we need to do. [Click for more on the Jewish Agency's work in Ukraine](#) [Click for more on JDC's activities in Ukraine](#)