

# 2020-2021 ANNUAL REPORT

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L-R Chief US Magistrate Judge, US District Court, Western District of PA,  
Cynthia Reed Eddy and Aleph Institute Board Member Ms. Estelle Comay Esq.

## LETTER FROM OUR LEADERSHIP

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2020 was, undoubtedly, one of our most challenging years at the Aleph Institute. Our prison population, whom we have been serving for the past 30 years since opening in Pittsburgh, has suffered tremendously. Besides a select few who were released to their homes, the majority continue to be isolated in their prison cells. Isolation in their units means no possibility of congregating in chapels, which makes life in prison so much more bearable for many. Beginning with Passover last year, our efforts to provide religious programming in the prisons were harshly affected. Family members have not been allowed to visit their loved ones. Although prison authorities did what they could during these trying times, inmates still struggled with losing access to religious services and dealing with isolation during the pandemic.

Although Aleph kept its family programs in operation, it has been a challenging year helping those who are incarcerated and their families. For those re-entering society, Aleph was able to secure housing for a few individuals but, overall, it has been a challenge during these times. The re-entry resources and centers have also been limited, so it has been very difficult to adjust to the new context under COVID. The Shifra Program, which was serving around 30 families prior to the pandemic, increased to 78 families. We provided thousands of pounds of food to food-insecure families for Passover and on a regular basis. To date, we continue to see an increased number of families struggling due to job loss, pay cuts, and family stress.

We received funding from the state -- through the NAP program -- with the gracious help of UPMC which came at a time of great need and has made it possible for the Aleph Institute to provide resources to many community members facing unforeseen challenges. In partnership with other agencies, we have been able to support our community. As the numbers of COVID cases begins to drop, we look forward to helping families adjust to the new reality.

We anticipate that this will be a challenge and plan to support the families we serve in the Shifra program, and accommodate more families in the community.



**Rabbi Vogel**  
Executive Director,  
Aleph Institute



**Marty Davis**  
Chairman of the Board



# IN-PRISON PROGRAMS

**T**he Aleph Institute's In-Prison Programs advocate for the needs and accommodations for incarcerated individuals. We provide a variety of humanitarian, educational, and religious services for inmates. Incarceration can be an isolating experience and our volunteers establish strong bonds with Jewish prisoners and their families. The Aleph Institute believes in continuing education and being able to practice one's faith while one is incarcerated, and we work to support individuals who are in prisons, jails, state hospitals, and long-term medical care facilities.

## VOLUNTEER VISITS

Currently in the U.S., 2.3 million people are incarcerated, and according to the Post-Gazette, nearly 70,000 are Jewish men and women. In Pennsylvania alone, there are almost 48,000 people incarcerated. In order to mitigate the effects of extremely isolating periods in prison, the Aleph Institute has grown its base of volunteers to over 100 chaplains who visit inmates at local, state and federal jails and prisons. Consistent visits help develop long-standing relationships not only with the inmates, but also with the prison administration who become more receptive to religious accommodations requested by the volunteer chaplains.

Due to the COVID-19 pandemic and social distancing restrictions, Aleph currently has 10 chaplains who have been allowed to visit the prisons during the pandemic. However, most volunteers have not been allowed to visit inmates since March of 2020. There have been a few limited opportunities to utilize the Zoom platform to connect chaplains with inmates but, overall, the process has been a challenge. As we go to print (May 2022) the prisons are beginning to open and we anticipate the prisons will be operating somewhat more openly. We understand that most prisons will not go back to the pre-COVID normal.

## ALEPH LIBRARY/BOOKS AND RELIGIOUS MATERIAL

Depending on the duration of a sentence, the time spent while incarcerated can be used in a productive manner to prepare for a life upon release. With the lack of Jewish literature available at various jails and prisons across the state, the Aleph Institute has developed a library that has now grown to include over 4,000 titles of Jewish-themed literature. The extensive catalogue of Jewish books, audio tapes, and video tapes is used by volunteers as educational support tools and these resources are also requested by

inmates interested in Jewish literature.

During the height of the pandemic, the Aleph Library unfortunately was closed. However, as of November 2021, the Aleph Library is again available for inmates and community to utilize. Since the pandemic, the Aleph Institute has also received additional donations to its library catalogue of books and religious material.

## **CHESED MENTORING PROGRAM**

Preparing for release can be an extremely daunting task. Without a home plan or financial security after release, the offender is very likely to re-offend, and end up back in prison. The national average recidivism rate is 76%, and 65% in Allegheny County, but these numbers drastically drop to 8% when an agency like the Aleph Institute is involved in the re-entry process. The Chesed Mentoring program matches an inmate preparing for release with a mentor who supports them for the pre-and post-release transition. These one-on-one relationships help establish a personalized plan of action to help the individual find housing, secure a job, and rebuild their community relationships upon release.

The Chesed Mentoring Program was effectively dormant during the pandemic and no new additional matches were made this past year. However, existing mentor relationships continued to thrive by utilizing alternative means of communication like phone, videoconference, etc.

## **HOLIDAY-BASED PROGRAMMING**

Incarceration can be extremely isolating, and the celebration of religious holidays should be for everyone, regardless of their situation. The Aleph Institute works to provide the ritual foods for Passover and Rosh Hashanah to incarcerated individuals. This program has expanded to ensure that incarcerated individuals have access to kosher food, not only on the holidays, and that family members of incarcerated individuals who struggle financially to put food on the table also have access to kosher holiday food. The goal is to ensure that individuals can participate in Judaism and be a part of the community despite being separated from loved ones in prison, or living in halfway houses or group homes.

Unfortunately, due to the limitations of social distancing, many inmates were not allowed to come to the chapel, so the Aleph Institute utilized alternative ways to provide meals to community members to celebrate Rosh Hashanah and Passover. As we go to print (May 2022) many of the prisons are operating and will continue to operate on zones, meaning the Jewish community of said zone can meet for the Shabbat and holiday programs. Prisons, since the beginning of the Covid pandemic, have separated inmates into “zones,” in order to minimize transmission.

## **TORAH STUDIES**

As a response to the drastic budget cuts in prison education programs during the 90's, the Aleph Institute's Torah Studies program was created, offering a variety of Jewish study material for individuals who are incarcerated and separated from the Jewish community. With the help of institutional chaplains and volunteers, the program currently serves 30 people enrolled in our various courses. Course subjects include foundations of Jewish law, ethics, customs, prayers, and history.

As a result of the pandemic, some jails and prisons have issued electronic tablets to inmates to continue with their religious studies and to maintain regular communication regarding their course. This new feature has allowed for inmates to continue the Torah Studies program and utilize their time, often isolated, to study the foundations of Jewish law.

## **JEWISH BURIAL**

If there is no next-of-kin to claim the remains of an inmate who passes away, the prison system will cremate the inmate and bury the ashes. The Aleph Institute has worked to provide proper Jewish burials for inmates or those in long-term medical facilities. Rabbi Wasserman of Shaare Torah has been of great assistance in this process.

Unfortunately, the number of Jewish burials has increased due to the pandemic. It has been a challenge, but the Aleph Institute has made tremendous efforts whenever possible to bring the remains to a respectable Jewish burial.

## **DOROTHY PROGRAM**

The Aleph Institute created the Dorothy Program in honor of Dorothy, a Jewish woman who lived 87 years in a state mental hospital before passing away without any connection to loved ones or community members. The Dorothy Program is a database of patients in state hospitals, long-term medical facilities, and nursing homes meant to connect volunteers who will visit with patients. With the difficulty of correctly identifying Jews in state hospitals, Rabbi Vogel vowed to make sure another person like Dorothy does not have to spend their life alone and forgotten. The Dorothy Program worked with 18 individuals in this past year.

Unfortunately, a few of Aleph's long-term clients of the Dorothy Program passed away. However, the program continues to operate virtually by connecting and caring for those in state hospitals. Due to strict HIPAA requirements, institutions may not identify religious preferences of clients, so if you know of an individual in the state hospital system, or in a group home setting, please contact our office.

# RE-ENTRY AND COMMUNITY TRANSITION PROGRAMS:

**T**ransitioning back into a community after being incarcerated is often a huge challenge. Difficulty securing housing, employment, and adapting to a more advanced society requires adequate support. The Aleph Institute's caseworkers and programs work towards helping individuals successfully transition back into society with the adequate skills to find a job. Substance abuse is a rampant problem in every community and the Aleph Institute supports individuals and families in working through their dependency issues.

## SUPPORT GROUPS

65% of those who are incarcerated struggle with substance abuse and addiction, but only 11% receive treatment. During the past year, the Aleph Institute hosted 12-step programs and other support groups such as Alcoholics Anonymous, Gamblers Anonymous, and Narcotics Anonymous, serving over 9,500 individuals impacted by incarceration and dealing with dependency. The programs operate from 6:45 am to 9:00 pm daily.

During the pandemic, many of the 12-step and religious support groups continued to operate virtually through Zoom. This allowed for Aleph to continue supporting clients during the challenging pandemic era. As of November, a few of the support groups have started to meet in person again following all necessary social-distancing precautions. As the mask requirement is now not so stringent, per CDC guidelines, we expect all the groups to return (those that have not yet returned), whilst at the same time to continue to offer a Zoom option.

## JOB TRAINING AND ASSISTANCE

One in four people who have been released from prison is looking for work, but still unable to find a job. The average unemployment rate for individuals who were formerly incarcerated is 27% compared to a national unemployment rate hovering around 3-5%. The risk of re-offending is higher immediately upon release, so the Aleph Institute's Re-entry Specialist works to help individuals smoothly transition back to society.

Aleph had to overcome a new hurdle this year. Many of the clients leaving prisons are happy to join the workforce.

However, with the impacts of the pandemic, job opportunities were not scarce, but were often available only through online applications. Aleph staff members focused remotely through the pandemic, helping community members apply for unemployment assistance on government websites and helping individuals adjust to a world that has rapidly moved online.

### **RELIGIOUS COUNSELING**

In Pennsylvania, there are nearly 42,000 people under state parole supervision and 1 in 35 adults is on state probation. With this vulnerable population under strict state scrutiny, it is helpful to have religious counseling and support. The Aleph Institute's in-house Rabbi has continued to hold religious counseling sessions in person and online over the past two years to counsel individuals who need religious guidance as they struggle with challenges in their lives.

### **MEDICAL CARE**

There is often a lapse in medical coverage from the time a person re-enters society and before Medicaid assistance can start.

## **FAMILY AND COMMUNITY PROGRAMS:**

**T**he programs and services offered by the Aleph Institute reflect the needs of families of incarcerated individuals and the community at large. The Aleph Institute recently received a generous grant to further develop our community programs. We have been able to hire an additional caseworker to support community members in need of services.

### **PROJECT SHIFRA**

Through home visiting and outreach, Shifra serves families in the community that are food-insecure, housing-insecure and coping with a variety of other stressors. While Aleph traditionally serves 40 families, including 300 children, as a result of the pandemic, the numbers has almost doubled to 78 families monthly and at one point the Shifra Program was serving 103 families facing food insecurity.



## CLOTHING

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With the help of the National Council of Jewish Women-Pittsburgh's Thriftique program, the Aleph Institute has helped seven individuals in financial need or who are being released from prison obtain clothing. This is especially helpful when individuals are re-entering the workforce and need appropriate clothing for work or a job interview. Over the past two years, Aleph has helped seven individuals find the clothing they needed for upcoming job interviews.

## EMERGENCY FUNDING

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With the help of the Jewish Family Assistance Fund, the Aleph Institute has helped identify community members in desperate financial need. An unexpected medical diagnosis, a death in the family, or job layoff can set a family back financially. During 2020, we have worked with over 20 families in dire circumstances who were eligible for emergency assistance funding. As a result of the pandemic, many families were on the verge of being evicted or struggled to secure food or housing.

## FOOD

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Hunger is a silent, but growing problem in almost every community. Many children rely on their school lunch as their only meal of the day and, with the cost of kosher foods slightly higher than that of average groceries, being able to participate in their faith can often be a challenge. The Aleph Institute partnered with Jewish Family and Community Services' Squirrel Hill Food Pantry and 412 Food Rescue to deliver 56 kosher food packages to families in the community during the holiday season during COVID. In addition, the Aleph Institute purchased a large refrigerator to expand our capacity to store more goods, to serve more community members. This program continues to serve over 78 families in our community, with much needed food.

# ALTERNATIVE SENTENCING PROGRAM

As of 2019, Pennsylvania's incarcerated population approached 48,000 people. Despite the reported decrease in the prison population by 0.5%, there has been a 22.3% increase in spending. The high costs associated with incarceration can be partially attributed to housing non-violent and first-time offenders with a relatively low risk to public safety in jails and prisons. Often, these offenders do not necessarily require secure confinement. Traditional incarceration can often lead to long-term adverse impacts on the individual and their families due to unemployment, poverty, fractured family dynamics, and neglected children. Therefore, the Aleph Institute's Alternative Sentencing Program (ASP) works with the courts to develop an individualized restorative program for non-violent first-time offenders in lieu of traditional expensive and debilitating incarceration.

The benefits to alternative sentencing are two-fold.

First, offenders, their families, and their community benefit from the individual keeping their job to support their families, volunteering for the community, and receiving counseling and support services from the Aleph Institute. While an individual remains in the community, they will receive a range of services provided by the Aleph Institute. Our services are often a part of the individual alternative sentencing plan which can include attending anonymous rehabilitation meetings for addictive behaviors, counseling and support groups with religious leaders, and various education and job training programs. Addressing the root cause of addictive behaviors and preserving family and community bonds can

help drastically lower recidivism rates.

Second, alternative sentencing saves costs in the short- and long-term. The annual cost of traditional incarceration in Pennsylvania was \$42,727 in 2015. Comparatively, alternative sentencing programs can produce potential savings of \$9.7 billion across the U.S. In addition, the focus on rehabilitation and strengthening community ties ensures successful re-entry for first-time offenders and aims to prevent re-offending, which would cost taxpayers much more in the long run to continuously house these repeat offenders in prisons and jails.

The ASP was initially a pilot project serving 10 eligible clients in various stages of the alternative sentencing process. There are currently 18 individuals enrolled in the program. All participants are currently employed and those without a substance abuse problem have strong success rates of keeping their family unit intact. The results have been so promising, and endorsed by judges on the Pennsylvania court, that there are plans to work with Center of Life in Hazelwood to expand the program to other communities throughout Pittsburgh. Rabbi Vogel was recently appointed to the Judicial Merit Selection Committee for Pennsylvania to help select administrative judges who could impact the future of the state's criminal justice judiciary.

During the beginning of the pandemic, the courts were closed, and cases were temporarily halted. As the court system slowly opens back up, Aleph has continued to support individuals in the Alternative Sentencing Program. In late 2021, Aleph successfully advocated for a father of four to serve three years in Federal prison, as opposed to a 20-year prison sentence.

## CHAPLAINS' CONFERENCE

The Annual Chaplain's Conference is a two-day event that brings together chaplains and rabbis from across Pennsylvania who are involved in the federal, state, and local prisons. Prison visits can be a new and challenging experience, but the Conference provides a refresher course in best practices for working with incarcerated individuals. In addition to the training provided to all Aleph volunteers, the Conference brings together a community of advocates to centralize a cohesive network of information regarding re-entry programs, security updates, and new regulations impacting the prisons.

In 2020, the Chaplains' Conference went virtual and was held on Zoom. During these isolating times, it was an incredible event attended by all the volunteer chaplains and representatives from various sectors of the government. By 2021 that Conference was in-person for those wishing to participate in person, with an online option for many of the sessions.



## ANNUAL SYMPOSIUM

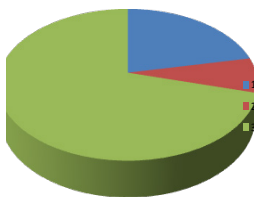
The Annual Symposium hosted by the Aleph Institute seeks to bring awareness about issues impacting the Jewish community: the complex family dynamics, financial stress, and unhealthy coping mechanisms that are entrenched in every community. The goal is to open a dialogue about tough topics. In addition, the Symposium has been recognized as a community event for secular organizations and community advocates passionate about humanizing incarcerated individuals. The speaker for the 2020 Aleph Annual Symposium was Judge Joy Flowers Conti and for 2021 it was The Honorable Cynthia Reed Eddy, Chief Magistrate Judge, Western District of Pennsylvania.



# FINANCIAL STATEMENT

## FOR THE TWELVE-MONTH ENDING DECEMBER 31, 2021

TOTAL INDIVIDUAL DONATIONS	114,967.49
FOUNDATIONS FUNDING	138,820.00
GOVERNMENT CONTRACTS	333,248.45
OTHER INCOME (RENTAL ETC.)	292.92
<b>TOTAL INCOME</b>	<b>587,328.86</b>
DIRECT PROGRAM SERVICES	235,739.03
GENERAL & ADMINISTRATIVE	248,322.53
FUNDRAISING	7,111.25
<b>TOTAL EXPENSES</b>	<b>491,172.81</b>
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>96,159.02</b>



Foundation/Grants  
Government Contracts  
Private Donations



**MURAL: "PEACE IN OUR COMMUNITY"**  
**BY INMATE IN THE STATE PRISON SYSTEM**



**ALEPH  
INSTITUTE**  
No One Alone,  
No One Forgotten.

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