

SPRING 2026 NEWSLETTER

CELEBRATING NEW LEADERSHIP ** PROPELLING ADVOCACY EFFORTS **
FOSTERING SOCIAL CONNECTIONS FOR OLDER ADULTS

New Leadership Looks Forward to Grotta Fund's Next Chapter

The Grotta Fund has undergone a leadership transition, with a new director and president now on board and excited to build upon its 100-plus-year legacy of serving older adults in our community.



Rebecca Weisberg
Grotta Fund Director



Renie Carniol
Retired Grotta Fund Director



Ilene Isaacs
Grotta Fund Advisory Council President

Renie Rich Carniol, a pioneer of New Jersey's age-friendly movement, retired as director of the Grotta Fund earlier this year. Carniol was instrumental in stewarding the funding of community initiatives that benefitted older adults in Essex, Union, Morris, Sussex and Somerset counties. She also partnered with the Henry and Marilyn Taub Foundation to underwrite conferences, meetings, training opportunities, research studies and other educational efforts aimed at persuading New Jersey's leaders of the value of implementing age-friendly practices. Her leadership led to several significant milestones, including New Jersey becoming the ninth state to join the AARP Network of Age-Friendly States and Communities in 2021, the adoption of the NJ Age-Friendly Blueprint in 2024, and the 2025 establishment of a state grant program to fund new age-friendly initiatives. The Grotta Fund also provided seed funding to the Food Health and Equity Coalition (FHEC) of Essex County and has subsequently awarded grants to many organizations providing solutions for older adult food insecurity.

Rebecca Weisberg is now in place as the new director of the Grotta Fund. Weisberg brings more than three decades of experience in nonprofit resource development and organizational strategy. She began her career in fundraising and communications for the arts and education, including work with the New York Foundation for the Arts and the French Embassy cultural services division, before transitioning to the social service sector.

"I look forward to building on the incredible accomplishments of Renie Carniol, which greatly strengthened the older adult community in our region," Weisberg said. "Grotta remains committed to driving systemic changes in programs and services for older adults and continuing to prioritize innovation and collaboration."

In addition to helping select and administer grants to organizations engaged in improving the lives of older adults, Weisberg will lead Grotta's advocacy work, playing an active role in coalitions such as Age Friendly NJ, Lifelong Strong NJ, and the NJ Food Fund. (CONTINUED ON PAGE 2)

SPRING 2026 NEWSLETTER

New Leadership Looks Forward to Grotta Fund's Next Chapter (*continued*)

Working alongside Weisberg will be Ilene Isaacs, president of the Grotta Fund Advisory Council.

Isaacs, who recently took the baton from longtime Council president Judi Sills, is a retired nonprofit leader whose career included serving as executive director of the New Jersey organizations VSA Arts and Table to Table. She first became involved with the Grotta Fund during her time at Table to Table, which was awarded a Grotta grant to develop innovative programs providing fresh, nutritious food to older adults. She looks forward to continuing to make an impact in food security and other issues facing older adults in New Jersey. "With cuts in Medicaid and SNAP funding, along with increases in fuel, utility and housing costs, Grotta's role is more important than ever to enhance and support aging well for older adults in this state," Isaacs said. "I look forward to working with Rebecca to build upon our strategic relationships, while continuing to listen to the needs in the community to effectively impact individual well-being and systemic change."



Advocacy Update!



The Grotta Fund for Older Adults is working hard to propel change through powerful collaborations and strategic partnerships. One of our key initiatives to advocate for older adults is **Lifelong Strong**, a statewide movement dedicated to the creation of a Multisector Plan for Aging (MPA) in NJ. **We are thrilled to share that Lifelong Strong has built significant support from members of the State Assembly, Senate, and Governor's Office to introduce legislation and/or an executive order to create the MPA within the next few months.** This cross-sector approach to infrastructure and social services aligns with the goals of government efficiency and affordability, bringing statewide agencies together to produce results based on knowledge and resource sharing. We are grateful to our partners for their collaborative leadership: Parker Life, The Henry & Marilyn Taub Foundation, NJ Future, Rutgers Hub for Aging Collaboration, Fair Share Housing, and NJ Advocates for Aging Well (NJAAW).

In other advocacy news, **Grotta is a founding member of the NJ Food Fund**, a public-private partnership to address the root causes of food insecurity across the state. By pooling resources and expertise with other funders and the NJ Office of the Food Security Advocate (OFSA), we help increase access to fresh, healthy food for seniors and vulnerable populations.

Together, these collaborations amplify the Grotta Fund's voice, ensuring that advocacy remains at the heart of our mission to improve the lives of older adults throughout the region.



Call to Action!

Visit <https://lifelongstrongnj.org/> to learn more, sign up for communications updates, and follow the campaign to join us in calling out to state leaders in support of an MPA for New Jersey.

SPRING 2026 NEWSLETTER

Tales of Success Emerge From 2026 Synagogue and Jewish Agency Grantees

In June 2025, one-year grants totaling \$207,650.00 were awarded to 17 synagogues and Jewish agencies planning dynamic programs for older adults in 2026. The grant recipients recently met with Grotta Fund Council members to share their progress, and we were excited to hear many success stories from organizations that have implemented their programs—and found enthusiastic participants among New Jersey’s older adults.



AABJ&D “Seasoned Citizen” Bus Trip

Ahawas Achim B'nai Jacob and David (AABJ&D) in West Orange, for example, successfully implemented its Seasoned Citizens ENrichment Events (SCENE) program, which provides enriching experiences for its senior members. It has already held five programs, including a wine tasting, CPR training, a Newark bus tour that attracted 50 participants, a Chanukkah celebration and a legal planning session—all of which reached or exceeded capacity. The reception was so positive the synagogue is now planning for a history class aimed at older adults.

Congregation B’nai Israel in Millburn set out to use its Grotta grant to fund one to two events per month focusing on promoting healthy aging and combatting social isolation among its older members. The synagogue has held seven events so far this year, including movie nights and guest speakers. Most of the events have included enhanced opportunities for social connections, such as ice breakers and mixed seating plans.



**Greater Summit Community Connections
Health & Wellness Event**



**Ben Rosenbach and Stephanie Israelson of
TBAY in live Q&A about their film “Goodman”**

Another synagogue that is drawing in crowds of older adults is Temple Beth Ahm Yisrael in Springfield, which used its Grotta funding to launch Food, Film and Friends, a film series for older adults. The synagogue has screened four films so far, averaging attendance of 33 people, including members and community residents. In surveying the participants, the synagogue organizers have heard only positive feedback. In fact, they said attendees have requested that future films include more time to socialize with other attendees.

Rebecca Weisberg, Director of the Grotta Fund, applauds the efforts of all the grantees to create connections between older adults, their synagogues, and their wider social and cultural circles. “The best path to reducing social isolation for older adults is to build foundational relationships between individuals and their communities. Grotta is proud to serve as a launchpad for Jewish organizations in our region to increase their capacity to strengthen these relationships, and we look forward to seeing how they will continue to grow.”

SPRING 2026 NEWSLETTER

Grotta Fund Spring Cycle - Invitation to Recent Grantees

The Grotta Fund has opened its Spring 2026 grant cycle and will be accepting applications through June 2. During this cycle, the Advisory Council will consider applications from Jewish organizations that received funding in the last two years for programs that engage older adults to promote a greater sense of self-worth, purpose, fulfillment, and social connection. Programs must focus on at least one of the following priorities:

- Deepen relationships for older adults
- Significantly expand the number of participants
- Integrate engagement activities for older adults into a wider array of programs and services

The first two years of Grotta's funding led to the establishment of engagement programs with active participation in a wide range of activities, from film series to regular phone check-ins from college students to older adults.

The Grotta Fund held application info sessions on May 6 and 11 to support grantees and anticipates awarding up to 10 renewal grants this spring.

Grotta Fund Leadership & Staff

Advisory Council:

President: Ilene Isaacs

Treasurer: Jeffrey Braemer

Council Members:

Ann Beckerman

Carol Billet-Fessler

Jeffrey Braemer

Karen Brand

Joshua Greenfield

Susan Kogan

Cathy Kuttner

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We want to hear from you!
If you are doing great work
on behalf of older adults in
our region, please reach
out to share your news and
updates.



*Advisory Council Member Carol Billet-Fessler
presenting retirement gift to Renie Carniol*

The Grotta Fund for Older Adults is a philanthropic fund of the Jewish Community Foundation of Greater MetroWest NJ. We prioritize programs that address aging issues, deepen vibrancy and inclusiveness in our towns, expand housing choices, and maximize opportunities for independence and well being. Our focus is in Essex, Morris, Union, Sussex, and eastern parts of Somerset counties. Grant applications are solicited through an announced RFP or invitation-only basis, limited to 501c3 organizations, religious institutions, and municipalities.

In addition to making grants, the Fund takes pride in strengthening organizational capacity, fostering collaborations, and promoting collective impact among its grantees. We participate in funder collaboratives, to amplify impact and learning.