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Seventy-four years after the end of World War II, some might assume that survivors of the Holocaust have largely died out. But not Lisa Hoffman.

Hoffman is an attorney for Bet Tzedek Legal Services, one of only two legal organizations in the United States that have programs helping Holocaust survivors secure reparations. That means she often has the privilege of meeting with survivors and hearing their stories. And if she can, she helps them get payments from the foreign governments that took their relatives, property and labor without compensation.

“The objective of our Holocaust services program is really, quite simply, to ensure that survivors of the Holocaust can live their remaining years with dignity and in as much comfort as possible,” says Hoffman.

Despite the decades that have passed, Hoffman says there are still plenty of opportunities for survivors to claim benefits. Some have never claimed benefits, she says; they may have refused, not have realized they were eligible, or previously didn’t need the money. There are also people who have claimed reparations, but may be eligible for more, she says. That’s especially true because new reparations programs or looser eligibility standards are announced several times a year—at least during the 13 years Hoffman has been doing this work.

“The trend over many years is toward sort of constantly... expanding eligibility and changing the rules of some of the programs,” she says. “So, you know, we haven’t really seen things slow down.”

That’s especially good news because Holocaust survivors in the U.S. disproportionately live in poverty. According to a paper presented last year at the Convening on Jewish Poverty, the Conference on Jewish Material Claims Against Germany estimates that there are about 80,000 survivors in the United States, with 28,000 of those—35%— in poverty. That’s a rate far higher than the 9.7% poverty rate among all elderly Americans reported by the Census Bureau.

The rate may be higher still in Los Angeles, an expensive city with a large Jewish population. Jewish Family Service of Los Angeles spokesman Michel Sidman says his organization provides social and financial services to about 1000 Holocaust survivors a month.

“I think it was found about a decade ago that almost half of the survivors in L.A. County would be considered poor or low-income,” says Hoffman. “So of course, it’s important for us to be able to improve their financial situation and stability by getting them whatever kind of compensation we can.”

And as Holocaust survivors age, they may have newer and expensive needs. Hoffman says it's common for older adults to need to "spend down" their assets to receive government benefits, and those with substantial health problems may start to need home health care or help around the house. In fact, she says that's a source of referrals to her program. The Jewish Family Service of Los Angeles provides many of these services to Holocaust survivors, but to be eligible, Hoffman says survivors must show that they have been awarded reparations.

"The receipt of reparations is kind of a shorthand way of establishing that a person is indeed a Holocaust survivor," she says. "So more and more, we're getting referrals from social services agencies."

Fortunately, eligibility for reparations can be quite broad. Hoffman says the full range of war experiences could qualify a person, even if that person was in hiding, living under an assumed name or left the home country before the worst part of the war. There are programs for people who were children or even still in the womb at the time, and there are programs compensating people who were persecuted by a specific foreign government.

Some of these programs provide one-time payments; others bring in monthly payments. Importantly for older people who are trying to spend down their assets, the Claims Conference says reparation payments do not count as income or assets for the purposes of U.S. federal benefits programs such as SSI or Medicaid (which is called Medi-Cal in California).

In order to determine which reparations a person might be eligible for, Hoffman typically sits down and listens to the person's life's story. She says everybody understands that survivors are unlikely to have documents demonstrating their persecution—but any documentation they do have can be helpful. Many programs will ask for identity documents—passports, citizenship papers, U.S. immigration records. What's especially helpful, she says, is documentation from before, during and the 10 years directly after WWII, because they help verify the person's story and suggest how they might get further documents.

That said, Hoffman encourages eligible people to apply even if they don't have any documents backing up their stories.

"I don't think anybody should ever worry that they shouldn't apply for reparations simply because they don't have documentary proof of where they were," she says. "Because the important thing is to be able to talk about the experience and, you know, that the story that they tell make sense, and that it fits within the historical record. And that really goes a long way."

One increasing challenge for the Bet Tzedek program is that with age—the Claims Conference says Holocaust survivors' average age is 82—comes memory loss that prevents clients from establishing a clear timeline. Ironically, another problem is that survivors who were babies or toddlers at the time may not have been aware of details like when exactly the Nazis took the family's property. In those cases, Bet Tzedek staff steps in and does some historical research, trying to verify what would have been likely to happen to someone in the appropriate area at the time.

Reparations are not the only available service for Holocaust survivors. Hoffman has a colleague in the Bet Tzedek Holocaust survivors program who provides general elder law services, including help applying for public benefits, estate planning documents, elder abuse prevention and more. Interested people are welcome to call Bet Tzedek about either those services or reparations at 323-549-5883. There is also a dedicated line for Russian speakers at 323-549-5811.

The Jewish Family Service of Los Angeles and the Jewish Federation of Greater Los Angeles offer services for survivors including transportation, mental health care, financial assistance, *kosher* meal delivery and social events, especially Café Europa social clubs for Holocaust survivors in both the city and the Valley.

Nor is Los Angeles the only place where survivors can seek help. The New York Legal Assistance Group is the other U.S. legal services provider with a Holocaust survivors' program. Like Bet Tzedek, it handles both reparations and elder law help. In Israel, survivors can turn to Aviv for Holocaust Survivors, which says about a quarter of Israeli survivors live in poverty.

And to serve survivors in other areas of the U.S.—the Claims Conference says large numbers of U.S. survivors also live in New Jersey, Illinois and Florida—Bet Tzedek in 2008 launched the Holocaust Survivors Justice Network, which trains and maintains a list of attorneys who help survivors apply for reparations free of charge. Generally, interested survivors can reach one of those attorneys through their local Jewish social services organization.

Hoffman says it's a privilege to hear her clients' stories. She can't share those stories, because she has an obligation as an attorney to keep her discussions with clients confidential. But when she prepares their paperwork to make claims, she says she always makes a point of including information about what they accomplished in life after the war.

"I usually include that even though it's not strictly required in the application, because I just think it's important to present these people as whole people and not just as a victim," she says. "If more people could hear their stories, I think that there would be so much better understanding and knowledge generally about the Holocaust."