

Jewish Child and Family Service
Serving the Needs of Their Community
by
Brian Campbell

Jewish Child and Family Service (JCFS) of Winnipeg has existed in some form for more than 100 years. It has been operating in its current form since 1952. They help families in many ways, including, poverty and child poverty, seniors and aging mental health, addictions recovery, help settling newcomers and refugees, and much more.

Director of Communications and Outreach, Rena Elblaze says, “We do a lot of work with Holocaust survivors, who, after 70 years, are still dealing with post-traumatic stress related issues. Our agency supports them in many ways so that they can continue to lead meaningful lives. Recently, we have been working with Russian seniors who are Holocaust survivors who were deprived of their identities under the Communist regime. The JCFS Settlement Services team developed a special program called ‘Paradise Found’ that helps these very cultured and educated people reconnect with their roots and learn about their background.”

Although many of the services provided by JCFS are for the Jewish community, not all are. For instance, their refugee support provides for all refugees that are in need of their services. “We have been helping refugees for many years. Right now it is the Yazidis, but we started with Holocaust survivors after WWII, after that were the Vietnamese Boat People and Russian refugees in the 70’s, and Bosnian refugees in the 80’s,” Rena says, “We do it because of our strong Jewish values.”

Executive Director, Al Benarroch, also stresses the impact of Jewish values and the importance of preserving a sense of family and community in the work the agency does. He comments on how these values contribute to JCFS’s foster care program: “In our Foster Care program, kids usually stay in the same home until they are 18 and, when possible, until age 21 with government supports...however the relationship is lifelong with the support of our Jewish community. Our families are very carefully chosen, so that the kids in the program can stay, grow, develop and be successful in their lives.”

JCFS also has an adoption program and they continue to work with both foster and adoptive families throughout the children's lives. Al says, "We work with the families for many years, through all transitions of the children's lifecycle. We ensure that the children in foster care get to connect with the community; they go to Jewish day school and Jewish summer camp. They are retained within our community, even if they aren't fostered by Jewish families."

JCFS President, Danita Aziza adds, "The beauty of the organization is that it evolves with the times. The agency, like the community, has migrated to the south end of the city and is located at the Asper Jewish Community Campus, in Tuxedo. If you look at a place like Tuxedo, where you have beautiful homes and beautiful lawns, you don't always consider that inside those homes are ordinary people with ordinary problems. They are dealing with aging parents, issues with teenagers and children, or unhappiness and mental health issues.

"And by and large JCFS is responding to these needs in the Jewish community and the general community, reaching out and saying, 'We are here to talk about the issues and to help and support you.' At the core of the Jewish people is a sense of community and helping one another, and to me that is what the organization speaks to. It is a support for everybody."

Approximately 6,000 people, both within and outside the Jewish community, benefit from the services provided by Jewish Child and Family Service. Most of these services are provided free of charge. Al says, "Our counselling service, which is available to both the Jewish and general community, is fee for service on a sliding scale and remains very accessible, with highly skilled therapists, short wait periods and, when needed, quick access to an on-site, full time consulting psychiatrist. Our services include counselling for individuals, teens, couples, parents and families."

JCFS has also developed a new speaker series to enable people to come forward and listen, learn and deal with topics that they are not usually comfortable talking about. Danita says, "It was an initiative to create a conversation and a safe place for people to come forward, hear and talk about these subjects. We are trying to make these social issues more acceptable to talk about and help people to realize that JCFS is there to help."

The next event in the series, 'Can we Talk about Depression', which takes place on Thursday, November 3 at 7:00 pm, will feature guest speaker Michael Landsberg, host of long running TSN show, 'Off the Record'. This forum, offered to the

entire Winnipeg community will feature a resource fair following the speaker presentation, to which many mental health and social services organizations have been invited to participate.

JCFS is always looking for volunteers to help out with various projects and invites people to ask about areas that are close to their hearts. The agency is growing and as the need for their services and programs increases, so does the need for support.

To find out more about what Jewish Child and Family Service has to offer and how you can get involved, go to www.jcfswinnipeg.org or call 204-477-7430.