150 years of caring support

Boston’s JF&CS marks truly major milestone

By Alexandra Lapkin
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The idea of immigrant women being paid to sew clothing and blankets for communities in need is a concept that sounds quite modern in its emphasis on locally made goods, entrepreneurship, grassroots philanthropy, and female economic empowerment.

But in fact, the Hebrew Ladies Sewing Circle was founded by Lina Hecht in Boston more than 100 years ago, in order to help the newly arrived Jewish immigrants from Eastern Europe. And this year, the Jewish Family and Children’s Service (JF&CS), which grew out of the United Hebrew Benevolent Association — to which the sewing circle and other programs belonged — marks its 150th anniversary and continues its mission of serving the vulnerable populations in relevant and innovative ways.

JF&CS Chief Executive Officer Rimma Zelfand believes the organization’s flexibility in responding to the changing community needs has kept it in business all these years.

“I think that’s why we are still the leading provider of services — because we listen … and we adjust accordingly,” she said. “And at the center of it all is the same goal of when people need care, we are here to care for them.”

Over the decades, the agency has welcomed Jewish refugees fleeing from Russian pogroms, Holocaust survivors arriving from war-ravaged Europe and, in more recent years, immigrants from the former Soviet Union. But in addition to helping new arrivals find their footing in the new land, JF&CS has also been responsible for assisting people of all religions and backgrounds who need help — including children and adults with cognitive and physical disabilities, the elderly, new parents and their infants, people struggling with poverty, and victims of domestic abuse.
Zelfand noted that the “comprehensive approach” to services is what makes her agency so effective. “Crisis are difficult,” she noted. “You need more than one program to manage it.” Zelfand said that’s why JF&CS has a constellation of programs, “but none of them can do it alone. A lot of our clients use more than one service.”

The Family Table, the largest kosher food pantry in New England, with locations in Waltham and Marblehead, belongs to a JF&CS host of services called Basic Needs, which serves as a safety net for populations struggling with poverty. Basic Needs clients include a Holocaust survivor who was shown how to apply for Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) benefits, and a single mother who was laid off from one of her three jobs and enrolled in a financial assistance program to help pay her rent.

In addition to the kosher food pantry, which is the largest in New England, Basic Needs offers free legal service; includes a Center for Family Assistance, which ensures that individuals and families experiencing financial difficulty receive necessary support; and offers a program called Journey to Safety, whose mission is to prevent domestic abuse and teen dating violence in the Jewish community while helping victims of abuse from all religious backgrounds.

Basic Needs Director Meredith Joy emphasized the holistic approach to her work with clients, which provides access to a range of resources. “It’s interesting when we trace our roots,” she said. “It goes right back to providing financial assistance to families. At that time, 1864, it was maybe $2 a week. And part of what we’re doing really goes back to the very beginning.

“When people are in a crisis and they’re worried about what they’re going to feed their children for dinner that night, it’s harder for them to do longer problem-solving and planning.”

In the process of solving their immediate needs such as hunger, Basic Needs staff also figures out longer-term issues, such as money for rent and utilities. To illustrate her point, Joy spoke about a survivor of domestic abuse, who, while receiving ongoing support from Journey to Safety, also receives kosher food from Family Table, and holiday gift cards and summer camp scholarships for her children.

JF&CS also provides a wide range of services for people with disabilities, from care coordination, day and employment programming, to social connections. Doreen Cummings, who oversees services for people with cognitive and physical handicaps,
has been working on developing creative housing models for her clients who would like to move out of their parents’ home. “Housing takes funding and resources,” Cummings said. “There are not a lot of options for kids who want to move out into an independent setting, where they can thrive with peers, have access to communities.”

With the help of federal and state benefits, JF&CS has built seven such housing communities, for 69 young adults, in Malden, Newton, Norwood and Walpole, with three new homes set to open this year. Some houses are fully accessible to the disabled and are designed for those residents who decide to age in place, while other residents may choose to move to a smaller and more independent housing option when they grow older. “Other organizations look to us as the leader,” Cummings said. “We have a huge impact on setting up models that could be used all over the world.”

Peggy Kaufman, who has been with JF&CS for almost 25 years, is a testament to the agency’s dedicated and loyal staff. She is the founding director of the Center for Early Relationship Support, which serves infants and young children and their parents. In addition to direct work with families, the center has a training institute that provides consultation, supervision and training to other programs throughout the state.

“Our core mission is to give parents and babies the best possible start in their relationship,” Kaufman said, “but also to [develop] those programs as they meet the needs of the families today.” In the last decade and a half, she has encountered many changes in the population that the center serves. An influx of immigrants and higher rates of substance abuse in pregnancy, in addition to a scarcity of income and benefits, and babies being born prematurely or with medical complications, all contribute to today’s problems plaguing many young families. “We are serving families that are enduring more hardships,” she said, “Our population of families has become more vulnerable over time and continues to be.”

Over the years, people who come to JF&CS and their needs may change, but the commitment that the United Hebrew Benevolent Association made in 1864, remains the same. “We are based on the Jewish tradition of social responsibility and respect to all members of the community,” Zelfand said. “Our mission is to improve people’s lives.”

Visit www.jfcsboston.org for more information about the organization.
The Family Table, the largest kosher food pantry in New England, is part of Jewish Family and Children’s Service (JF&CS).