Jewish charity marks 150 years of helping others

Rimma Zelfand, CEO of the Jewish Family & Children’s Service, joined Boston Herald Radio’s “Trending Now” yesterday to talk about her organization’s amazing 150-year history. Here are excerpts:

Q: How did your organization start?
A: It was started by a couple of businessmen who wanted to help new immigrants. They wanted to make sure they had food, shelter and their basic needs were covered. It’s a wonderful mission. One hundred and fifty years later we have become a leading provider of human services in Massachusetts. We help 17,000 people a year. At the center of our agency, our mission is still to help the most vulnerable.

Q: What services do you provide to children and families?
A: We start with adoption and go all the way to bereavement, and we help people in between. We help new mothers be better parents. We serve many people with disabilities. We try to provide them with as much independence and dignity and create communities and to make connected lives for them.
We also make sure the basic needs are covered. We have the largest kosher food bank in New England. Over 500 families come to us for food every month. We help people who find themselves in abusive relationships. We have many different programs for seniors.

Q: How did your organization assist Holocaust survivors?

A: One of the reasons that we are so successful for 150 years is that we realize what the community needs the most, and we provide that service. After the second World War, 50 teenage Holocaust survivors arrived in Boston. They had no families except for us. We took care of them. They lived with us and we put them through college, and many of them had a wonderful successful life. Some of them actually volunteer for us right now.

Q: With a poor economy, how do you keep donations coming in?

A: It’s a challenge. We can always use more, and the need for our services is increasing. We find that clients call us with very complex issues. ... Crises are complex, and one thing may not help. We do rely on government funding and on private donations.

Q: What are some of the challenges your agency has been through over the years?

A: Our agency has always been there for people. The Chelsea fire (in 1973) was very tragic. We were there to help. The Holocaust, after the war, when refugees came. Most recently in 2008, when the economic crisis hit, we were there for the communities. Whatever the calamity is, we were there.

Listen to the full interview with Rimma Zelfand at bostonherald.com.