



Jewish Family Services: Supporting Edmonton Families of All Faiths

By Debby Shoctor

Jewish Family Services (JFS) is more than a Jewish welfare organization, although it started out that way back in 1942. Today, JFS is a community-based counseling and support service available to anyone in Edmonton and surrounding area regardless of religion, race, gender, sexual orientation, age or financial status. Today, only about half of their clients come from Edmonton's Jewish Community. The remainder come from the Edmonton community at large.

Officially incorporated in 1955, its mission is to promote the well-being of individuals and families in a confidential, caring environment: "We envision a world of economic and social justice: a world where individuals, families and the community care for and support themselves and one another. To this end, we provide strength and support to individuals and families in need, in a manner sensitive to Jewish values."


Jewish Family Services is founded upon the acceptance of the intrinsic worth and dignity of each individual; the appreciation of people's right to meaningful opportunities to make and influence decisions which affect them: the recognition of the interdependence between individuals and society; and the respect for cultural and religious heritage. The role of the agency is to be responsive to, and to care for everyone who walks through the door of the agency, as resources and manpower permit, by providing a professional counseling, education and information service.

A Brief Look Back

Before 1942, the welfare needs of the Edmonton Jewish community were met by volunteers from various organizations, including the local B'nai Brith Lodge, the Shalom Aleichem Free Loan Society, the Aznoches Orchim, the Federated Budget and the Council of Jewish Women. When the Edmonton Community Chest was organized in 1942, a grant was given to the Jewish Community so that further campaigns in the Jewish Community for welfare money would be unnecessary.

Accordingly, the Jewish Welfare Society was set up and given a yearly grant of less than \$2000 from the Chest and this was administered by a committee of representatives from the above mentioned organizations. In January of 1955, an informal society was formally incorporated, and registered under the Alberta Societies Act with its own board.

In October of 1956, Mr. Max Levy was appointed the first full-time Executive Director, replacing the part-time case worker, Mr. Ram. An office was established in the Petroleum Building, and costs were shared by the Jewish Welfare Society and the Jewish Community Council. In 1957, the Edmonton Zionist Council became a partner.



Between 1955 and 1958, Clara Mintz, a professional Social Worker, served as the Agency's first President. In 1958, she became its Executive Director. In 1959, the society became an autonomous agency with a half-time graduate caseworker and an Executive Director appointed to work solely for the Society.

In 1960, when the Community Chest ceased to exist, the United Community Fund of Greater Edmonton was established, and the Society became a member of that fund. In January 1961, the agency changed its name to Jewish Family Services, and adopted a new constitution. According to Clara's son, Bruce, "The reason for this change was that Clara believed that the use of the term "welfare" depicted something that would apply only to a certain segment of the community. She firmly believed that the family was the core of the community. [At that time] Jewish Family Services focused on parent/child relationships, marital problems, the elderly and delinquency." In 1962, Canadian Jewish Congress started funding services rendered to new Jewish Immigrants. It is at this point that Edmonton's Jewish Family Services started to grow rapidly. In 1963, for example, its annual budget was \$12,000. By 2000, it was \$338,000.

Jewish Family Services Today

Presently located on 124th St., the current JFS activities include general counseling, services to immigrants, seniors, including the SMART program (Seniors Making Age-Related Transitions) support to people in poverty, bereavement counseling and support through the Edmonton Bereavement Centre. Community development is under the current leadership of Larry Derkach and his staff. Rabbi Daniel Friedman (Beth Israel Congregation) is the current Board President.

Counseling services include help dealing with many areas including: Anxiety and Stress; Relationship Difficulties; Family Conflicts; Self-Esteem Issues; Depression; Grief, Separation and Loss; Life and Career Uncertainty; Anger Management; Trauma and Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder; Abuse; Addictions and mental Health Issues.

The JFS Bereavement Centre offers program and support services such as: Living with Loss, Walking with Grief, Living Beyond Loss – Who Am I Now?, Healing Grief for Parents, Griefworks, Bereavement Support Training Courses, Grief in the Workplace, Adolescent Grief and Mourning and Complicated Mourning. There is as well a lending library.

Today, funding for the activities of JFS comes primarily from the United Way, Canadian Jewish Immigrant Aid Services, United Jewish Appeal, the National Council of Jewish Women, Family & Community Support Services, Edmonton Community Adult Learning Association (ECALA), casino proceeds, private donations and fundraising activities.