Jewish Family Service

Jewish Family Service is a nonsectarian, nonprofit human services agency. JFS is dedicated to helping people overcome life’s challenges and live more fulfilled lives. JFS served 24,000 clients from the Denver and Boulder areas in 2018 and projects that number will increase by 1,000 in 2019.

Upcoming Events

Reel Hope/Boulder: a Nov. 2 panel discussion with writer/director Duncan Tucker and screening of his Oscar-nominated film, “Transamerica,” starring Felicity Huffman.

FACES of JFS: This Dec. 5 “winter solstice” honors attorney Aaron Hyatt, and Scott Stillman, president and managing partner of MassMutual Colorado. Both serve on the JFS board.

JFS Executive Luncheon: Golf legend Jack Nicklaus is the speaker for this April 29, 2020 fundraiser being held at the Hyatt Regency Convention Center.

Lunchbox Express served 20,862 free lunches in 2018

Organization’s 30 programs help people

find jobs, age in place, receive mental health counseling and get food and financial assistance

By Joanne Davidson

Jews had made their way to the dusty frontier town of Denver from countries like Germany, Lithuania and Ukraine, hopeful that the ideal, dry air and sunshine would help cure their tuberculosis—or that the freedom that had eluded them in their homelands would bring a brighter future.

Arriving with little more than the clothing on their backs, these immigrants lived in squalid conditions along the banks of the South Platte River and West Colfax Avenue—something that left Frances Wisebart Jacobs appalled. So much so that Jacobs, who eventually came to be known as the nation’s “Mother of Charities” for her work in starting United Way, National Jewish Health and other human-service nonprofits, joined with several others to form the Hebrew Ladies Benevolent Society, a group that would deliver soup, coal, clothing, soap and medical care to the grateful settlers.

Today, the society is called Jewish Family Service and its 140 employees and 1,211 volunteers continue the work of its founders by coming to the aid of some 24,000 clients annually through 30 programs that range from helping seniors to age in place to offering job training and placement for people with “significant barriers” to employment. Other programs include giving food and financial assistance to those in crisis and providing mental health counseling to those unable to access it otherwise.

This help is available to all, regardless of faith, age, ethnic or economic background.

“We serve people who can afford to pay so we can serve those who can’t,” says president and chief executive officer Linda Foster. “And, we probably serve more non-Jewish people than we do those who are Jewish.”

Foster says special credit is due to the JFS volunteers, such as the 472 JFS’ Senior Solutions team provides support for older adults

JFS president/CEO Linda P. Foster is now 37, was born I changed direction.” The Fosters are also the parents of Rachel, a public health dentist in Vermont, and Daniel, one of the first openly LGBTQ candidates for Cook County Commissioner.

As the community’s needs expand, Foster, her staff and board are examining how they can best meet them.

Mental health services are a priority, and plans are to expand current JFS offerings to include virtual counseling where clients can chat with professionals online. That, Foster says, would be of benefit to those without transportation to the JFS offices in southeast Denver and those who live in rural areas where mental health services do not exist. Another priority is homelessness.

“We have a rapid re-housing program, that puts people in a place where they can live safely until they can get back on their feet, but perhaps more importantly, what can we do to help prevent homelessness?” she asks.

Her vision for JFS’ future doesn’t involve rash changes, just adapting based on relevancy and the Jewish values that include tikkun olam, or the obligation to make the world a better place, and the duty to strive for social justice, perform acts of kindness and view every human as equal. “I love that we look at the whole person, and how we listen carefully to determine what the needs are so that if we can’t help, we can get them to a place that can.”

Joanne Davidson is the former society executive director and then head of school at the Solomon Schechter Day School, to settle in Steamboat Springs, where they had maintained a vacation home for 21 years. They’ve since relocated to Denver.

“Linda is both an accomplished leader and relationship builder with a longstanding and deep devotion to the values that we at JFS hold dear,” says Laura Mimbach, a member of the JFS board and chair of the search committee that gave Foster unanimous approval. “We believe she is just the right person at the right time to move JFS forward.”

Foster majored in history and religion, with a minor in biology, at Wellesley College in Massachusetts, and was president of a privately-held real estate finance company before opening her own residential property development firm, both in Illinois.

“Originally I was going to be a doctor, like my father,” Foster recalls, “but once our son, Jeremy, who is now 37, was born, I changed direction.” The Fosters are also the parents of Rachel, a public health dentist in Vermont, and Daniel, one of the first openly LGBTQ candidates for Cook County Commissioner.

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