



JFS is using Uniper Care to keep connected with seniors.

UNIPER CARE (UNIPER)

HELP WANTED

Funders enable Jewish Family Service to grow despite COVID.

BARBARA LEWIS CONTRIBUTING WRITER

Thanks to the generosity of Detroit's Jewish community and other funders, Jewish Family Service (JFS) has been able to expand its staff and volunteer corps over the past two years, reconfiguring and adding services to help the community cope with the stresses of COVID.

The agency was able to pivot quickly to serving its counseling clients via Zoom, Facetime or video conferencing rather than in person. Insurers relaxed their requirements, making it easier for the agency to bill for remote services, said CEO Perry Ohren.

JFS provides mental health services (counseling), services to older adults and community

safety net programs, such as one-time cash grants to cover emergencies.

Much of the recent expansion was made possible by grants that added \$2 million to the organization's annual budget, bringing it to \$17 million. The infusion enabled JFS to increase its staff about 11 percent to 125, which in turn has helped to reduce the amount of time community members have to wait for services.

The agency still has 14 open positions, said Wendy Uhrig, director of human resources, including a director of community initiatives, social workers and program managers.

The COVID pandemic has taken a toll on all of us, Ohren

said. "Everyone on the planet arguably has more anxiety and depression than in the past." And those who were JFS clients before COVID hit "need a little more than they did before."

JFS helps 15,000 people every year and provides ongoing services for more than 5,000.

Last year, JFS got a grant from a partnership between Oakland County and United Way that enabled them to increase the number of emergency services recipients from 750 to 900.

Grants from the Jewish Federation of Metropolitan Detroit helped JFS expand its counseling services to the Detroit area's Jewish day

schools; the school-based social work services staff increased from five to eight.

Marissa Preston joined JFS as an outpatient clinical psychotherapist in March 2021. Providing services remotely was a big adjustment for her because she previously worked at a residential treatment facility for children.

She works primarily with children who are struggling with isolation. "I think we can agree that COVID-19 has impacted almost everyone's mental health," she said.

JFS staff were also concerned about social isolation among older adults during the pandemic. Most of JFS's approximately 1,000 senior clients live



Perry Ohren



Wendi Uhrig



Marissa Preston

independently, with workers visiting them at home as necessary. During the pandemic, said Ohren, direct care workers could continue to visit clients at home, but social workers and volunteers switched to remote connections.

Because many seniors are less adept with technology than younger adults, JFS offered them Uniper Care, a service developed by an Israeli company that enables televisions to function like computers. With a TV remote, users can access Zoom and other Internet programs on their televisions. "A TV is not as scary for them as an iPad or a laptop," Ohren said.

JFS's transportation services morphed to deal with pandemic changes, and none of its drivers had to be laid off. In the past, the drivers' main duty was taking clients to appointments. They had fewer requests for rides during the pandemic, allowing redeployment to food deliveries for Yad Ezra, the kosher food pantry, and augmenting volunteer home delivery of Kosher Meals on Wheels.

VOLUNTEERS WANTED, TOO

The agency's need for volunteers is also growing, said Melissa Pletcher, who joined JFS in October 2020 as director of volunteers after

losing her previous job to the pandemic. She is looking for volunteers to be social companions and technology advisers to older adults, provide pro bono legal services and deliver for Kosher Meals on Wheels.

Pletcher said many supporters called JFS early on in the pandemic to ask how they could help. In two or three months, they added more than 60 volunteers for Kosher Meals on Wheels, she said.

Although some of JFS's increased funding was in the form of one-time grants, Ohren says the agency expects to be able to continue the programs.

He expects the need for JFS's services to grow.

"There was a mental health crisis before the pandemic, meaning that there weren't enough helping professionals at that point for the hurts people were needing help with. The explosion of the mental health crisis amidst the pandemic, with so many more people needing mental health support, has full-on exacerbated the problems," he said.

"We're waiting for the other shoe to drop. Years from now, we'll still be feeling the impact" of COVID in terms of the numbers of people needing services, he said.

"This pandemic will have very, very, very long legs." 

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