

# JFS Outreach

“Frum-friendly” Lev Detroit initiative targets Orthodox community.

LOUIS FINKELMAN CONTRIBUTING WRITER



**J**ewish Family Service (JFS) of Metropolitan Detroit continues to develop Lev Detroit (lev means heart in Hebrew), directed specifically toward the local Orthodox Jewish community.

“Lev Detroit, JFS’s recent initiative to be as frum-friendly as possible, began in 2019 with JFSers Dini Peterson and Sammie Rosenbloom leading the charge,” says JFS CEO Perry Ohren. “This follows almost 100 years of being as welcoming as possible to members of the Orthodox communities.”

Dini Peterson, a licensed social worker, now JFS Chief Program Officer for Family & Community Services, began working for JFS in 2011. Since then, she notes, “the Orthodox segment of the community has grown, and JFS has made a special effort to be a resource to the Orthodox community. We have been working to build up trusting relationships with rabbis, schools and community organizations.”

So, she and Rosenbloom spearheaded Lev Detroit. “The history of JFS involves trying to serve all segments of the community,” Peterson says. “JFS efforts grow organically, but Lev Detroit is a new level of investment for the agency. Giving outreach to the Orthodox community a name and devoting resources to it, creates a focus and demonstrates an ongoing commitment.”

Last year, Bentzion Belen joined JFS as director of Lev Detroit. He specifies some of the department’s activities:

• Orthodox 101: “We provide training to all our staff, and to some outside groups including medical centers, to help professional care providers become more sensitive to the cultural background of Orthodox clients, such as a

concern for kashrut, Shabbat, family purity, holidays and the high cost of school tuition.

• “Lev Detroit provides referrals to JFS’s behavioral health department, which employs culturally sensitive licensed social workers, as well as to Family Support Services and other departments within JFS. Lev Detroit may also refer to external resources within the local community and to financial resources available to members of the Jewish community, including Matan Beseter and Yad Ezra.”

• For clients who seek more high-level intervention, Lev Detroit provides referrals to culturally aware external therapists.

• “We have increased the number of school-based social workers to many of the yeshivot and day schools, serving over 1,400 students within the community.”

• The New Family Welcome Basket is a pilot program. “When families move here from outside of Detroit, we present them with a welcome basket that includes a resource guide for the institutions of our community, restaurants, local synagogues (and davening times), *Community Links* and information about the Women’s Orthodox League (WOL) and Hatzalah. Local small businesses supply a coupon booklet offering discounts for shopping in the area. More than 50 families who moved here since midsummer have received these baskets.”

• Another program helps with the cost of school uniforms. “Several of the girls’ schools require uniforms, which can be expensive for families. We have arranged for families to pick up uniforms without charge. To date, we have provided uniforms for 118 students in 50 families.”

Regarding JFS’s food assistance program, Ohren says, “We provide food vouchers to help families. The vouchers help families purchase food at local markets and at the Grove for families that purchase at the

entirely kosher market.

“In the weeks leading up to Passover,” he says, “we provide an additional \$50,000 to \$70,000 of food assistance. Passover costs money. We do not monitor the kind of Passover provisions that our clients choose. We want to help people maintain their lives and commitments.”

Belen quantifies the project: “Last year, we helped 335 families prepare for the holiday. The program is not just for Orthodox families. We believe that 180 of the families are Orthodox.”

Last year, Lev Detroit brought in Rabbi Avrohom Union from California for two talks offering guidance on how to detect and deal with domestic abuse, with one talk for rabbis and another for rebbetzins and women who teach kallah classes.

Lev Detroit also cooperates with other organizations. For example, the National Council of Jewish Women provides backpacks filled with school supplies at the beginning of the academic year. “This year,” Belen reports, “we worked with NCJW to provide 536 backpacks to students from 173 families, many who are Orthodox.”

As a new initiative, Bikur Cholim of Detroit provides a packet for new mothers that includes practical items. Lev Detroit contributed resource guides including information about available mental health support.

Belen notes that JFS currently employs 14 Orthodox staffers and two Orthodox interns.

“Lev Detroit makes sense as an initiative of Jewish Family Service,” CEO Ohren says. “Growth in the Jewish community is now in the Orthodox segment. We are Jewish Family Service: Our first name is ‘Jewish’; we want to serve everyone in the Jewish community. We want to be sensitive to the special requirements of each of the subpopulations that show up at JFS.” ■



Dini Peterson



Bentzion Belen