



Executive Director's Message

Not “Business As Usual”

JFS responds to impacts of the recession



Steve Slaten, Ph.D.

I once heard the role of JFS described as “to be moved to action in the face of suffering...and having the impossible task of responding to infinite needs with limited resources.” The declining job, housing and stock markets and a less certain future, along with cuts in state funding, have saddled more families with a greater range and magnitude of both immediate and long-term needs.

Virtually every family is experiencing more stress, often leading to greater anxiety, depression, somatic complaints, drinking and other addictive behaviors, and lashing out. Worry and tension can reverberate through families, affecting spouses and children.

JFS is responding by expanding its array of services despite a far more challenging environment for financial support. Not surprisingly, the number of calls for counseling at JFS surged in March following a steady climb over the past nine months. Despite our loss of a \$50,000 United Way allocation in 2008, the agency has increased its counseling staff. Licensed clinicians Danielle Comeau and Nathan Dittmar joined JFS in 2008, and Michaele McGinnis started in April 2009. Michaele extends JFS treatment offerings with an expertise in behavioral medicine, and she is the only clinician certified in biofeedback in this part of Massachusetts.

Layoffs are affecting both blue-collar and white-collar workers, as well as the self-employed, leading many to settle for “survival” jobs. Work is so integral to our identities that many find employment and financial problems shameful, often discouraging them from turning to their support systems for help. Isolation can deepen despair and exacerbate the stress of the job search.

Until now, JFS has never offered vocational services. Recently, in cooperation with Jewish Federation of Central Massachusetts (JFCM), we sought the help of Jewish Vocational Services (JVS) of Boston. In April, JVS brought to Worcester its Weathering the Storm workshop on innovative tools and strategies for landing a job. JVS also trained a cohort to facilitate “Success Teams,” peer support groups of job seekers.

While synagogues and churches are trying to organize their support networks, JFS and JFCM are working to establish a job bank and identify professionals to assist people with career or credit counseling, foreclosure prevention, and other vocational or financial matters. JFS will coordinate these activities throughout the community, so help will be available irrespective of one's affiliation.

Neighborhood Connections has launched its membership enrollment drive following two years of careful planning. Most services will begin in May. This aging-in-place program will help folks over 60 on Worcester's West Side to remain safe, independent and socially connected in their homes as long as possible.

While a recession is not an ideal time to start a new membership program, it is for Neighborhood Connections. The vast majority of seniors prefer to live in the familiar surroundings of their homes and neighborhoods. Yet declining assets and home values means fewer elders have the option of moving to senior-designed housing such as over-55 developments, continuing care communities or assisted living. Neighborhood Connections can help seniors to spend wisely and grow older with greater dignity and enjoyment.

JFS enjoys a hard-earned reputation as a trusted, reliable, highly competent resource for enabling more families to address a greater variety of needs. Seldom in the past has fulfilling the mission of JFS and its goal of *Tikkun Olam*, or “repairing the world,” been more urgent. As this urgency continues to grow, and despite the challenges we all face, JFS needs your continuing support as well. Thank you.

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