



PRESS CONTACT: Robert Sax
SAX PR/Marketing
818-508-7660
robert@saxpr.net

Jewish Family Service of Los Angeles Backgrounder

In 1854, the tiny Jewish community of the dusty pueblo of Los Angeles (population 1,610) established the Hebrew Benevolent Society, the area's first charitable organization. The volunteer group's purpose was to collect funds from "those who have" and distribute them to "those who have not." The Society's first act was to purchase land for a cemetery to fulfill the Jewish religious commandment of burying the dead. Little did these pioneer Jews know that they were launching the future Jewish Family Service, the first and largest social services agency in Los Angeles.

Today, JFS provides vital services to people of all ages, ethnicities and religions. JFS' nationally recognized programs counsel troubled families and individuals, support the elderly, house the homeless and abused and feed the hungry. JFS is the first call for families in need.

Los Angeles grew slowly from 1854 to the early twentieth century. The Society's primary function was the distribution of charity to the needy of the city, Jew and non-Jew alike. By 1912, however, the Jewish community had grown large enough to require such specialized services as medical and child care, which the Society added to its roster of services. The Society also assumed the responsibility of helping to settle Jewish refugees from Eastern Europe.

In 1918, the Hebrew Benevolent Society merged with the allied Ladies Hebrew Benevolent Society and became the Jewish Aid Society (JAS). It hired its first professional social worker and evolved to the more complex role of helping people change their lives.

Following World War I, Los Angeles became an industrial center and experienced significant growth and change. JAS responded by adding additional services, including an employment agency, dental care, legal aid, and a student loan fund. It also became closely allied with other Los Angeles groups, cooperating with the Public Welfare Program and joining the Los Angeles Community Chest as a charter member.

By the 1920s the agency's name had changed to the Jewish Social Service Bureau (JSSB) to better reflect its new mission of helping clients solve their social and personal problems. Trained professionals now ran the JSSB and its board and committees became policy-making groups.

Then the stock market crashed and the Great Depression began. The Jewish community was suddenly faced with severe unemployment as Jewish carpenters, bricklayers, electricians and other trades people lost their jobs. In response, the JSSB appealed to Jewish employers to help the unemployed find work. This was the beginning of the Jewish Vocational Service.

The 1930s saw the arrival of Jewish refugees from Nazi Germany. They were granted entrance to the United States only on condition that they would not receive public assistance. Their needs became each Jewish community's responsibility, and in Los Angeles the JSSB provided food, money, and jobs. This was just the start of JFS' impressive work in helping immigrants settle and assimilate into the community.

In 1932, Freda Mohr, a professional social worker, became the executive director of the JSSB. One of the most influential members of the agency, she was its leader for 34 years until

her retirement in 1966. Under Mohr's guidance, students from the School of Social Work at the University of Southern California and from the University of California at Los Angeles received professional training at the agency; this program is still in operation. One of JFS' best-known services, the Freda Mohr Center for seniors, is named in Mohr's honor.

The 1940s brought World War II and great social change as men went to war and women went to work. JSSB responded to the new challenges created by family upheaval, a housing shortage and a demand for child care for female war workers. Social work, influenced by psychology and psychiatry, also evolved to meet these challenges. In 1946, this development was reflected by the agency's change to its current name, Jewish Family Service.

Following World War II, JFS' greatest challenge was re-establishing and maintaining the family as a functioning unit of society. The agency had to deal with problems caused by the return of servicemen, an increase in the Jewish population and the migration of the city's Jews to new areas of Los Angeles. Resettlement of Holocaust survivors and other displaced persons from Europe was another significant challenge for JFS.

Toward the end of the 1950s, immigration caseloads declined while demands for personal counseling rose. The Jewish population of Los Angeles grew tremendously and the agency expanded, opening a district office to serve the burgeoning suburbs of the San Fernando Valley.

In the turbulent 1960s, JFS focused on families experiencing difficulties in relationships, such as marital problems, and individuals with emotional or psychiatric problems that made social adjustment difficult. It also increased services to seniors. Volunteers were recruited and re-integrated into the fabric of the agency. As a result, JFS expanded its influence from the indigent and poor to people of all economic levels.

In 1970, JFS opened the Freda Mohr Center in the Fairfax district to help a rapidly growing population of elderly Jews. Eight years later, the agency established the Valley Storefront to offer services to the suburban residents of the San Fernando Valley. JFS began to receive federal, state, and city contracts to increase services to the frail elderly, and a kosher meals program was created. In 1979, JFS created the innovative Multipurpose Senior Services Program (MSSP) to help low-income, frail elderly remain in their own homes. Funded by the State of California, the MSSP is one of JFS' most successful programs.

In 1982, JFS opened the Senior Services Building on Fairfax Avenue. All of the services provided for seniors in the area – therapy, support groups, transportation, and help in the home – could now be obtained in one location. In addition, JFS began working with homeless families, alcohol and drug abusers, people with HIV/AIDS and other special populations.

In the 1990s, JFS earned a national and international reputation as a model of excellence for services to seniors. It has increased its work with families and children, victims of domestic violence, single parents, and people with developmental disabilities. It also established a reputation for excellence in crisis counseling for its work in helping the victims of emotional trauma caused by accidents, crime and other critical incidents.

In the 21st century, JFS has strengthened its school-based counseling services, opened a new emergency shelter for battered women, renovated its homeless shelter for families and created programs for abused children. A new program, “Foster Hope,” aims to increase awareness of the great need for Jewish foster homes to provide for the growing number of Jewish foster children in Los Angeles County.

JFS successfully absorbed three programs created by the Jewish Community Centers of Greater Los Angeles – the Israel Levin Senior Center, the SOVA Food Pantry and the Westside

Adult Day Support Services Center. JFS has also established its first international partnership, an alliance with the Health and Social Welfare of Tel Aviv, Israel that benefits both communities.

In 2003, JFS received a grant from the federal government's Administration on Aging to establish a pilot program to identify and serve a "Naturally Occurring Retirement Community" (NORC) in the cities of Los Angeles and West Hollywood. The goal is to develop new ways of delivering services to senior citizens who wish to remain in their own homes and who live among many other seniors in high-density NORCs. The lessons learned from this program will help JFS evolve to better serve the aging population of Los Angeles. The program is the only one in California and is one of just 15 such projects in the country.

Another JFS model program, the Unidas Project, is a partnership with Rio Vista Village Apartments, a HUD housing project in East Los Angeles. This successful parent empowerment program works with Latina single mothers and helps them develop self-esteem and parenting skills. JFS hopes to expand the program to other HUD facilities serving Latinos and African-Americans in economically disadvantaged communities.

The development of "family resource centers" is a key project for the future. The centers will expand on JFS' renowned counseling services to provide more comprehensive, integrated services for the increasingly complex situations of families with members who have mental and emotional problems. A troubled teenager, for example, may have developed problems due to a parent's sudden unemployment. A JFS family resource center will take a broad approach to care, providing counseling for the teen and her family as well as vocational services to assist the parent in finding another job.

JFS is also working to increase its outreach to ethnic groups within the Jewish community, notably Russians, Persians and Israelis. The agency is currently evaluating its

services to these growing communities and developing new strategies and tactics, including a paraprofessional program, to better serve them.

152 years after its modest beginning, JFS comprises more than 50 programs covering every phase of life. It provides services at 23 locations across Los Angeles County. Its staff of more than 400 includes licensed clinical social workers, psychologists, public health experts, gerontologists, clinical nurse practitioners, chefs, drivers and more. They, along with more than 1,000 dedicated volunteers, serve more than 60,000 people in need every year.

JFS' annual budget is more than \$24 million, a substantial increase from the founders' original treasury of \$150! The agency is supported by, among others, The Jewish Federation, the United Way, the City and County of Los Angeles, the State of California, private foundations, corporate contracts and individual donors.

Jewish Family Service of Los Angeles can be seen as a paradigm for social service agencies throughout the country and the world. It is an institution willing and able to adapt, respond, and grow to meet the needs of individuals and families residing in the communities it serves.

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