

# AGENCY OF THE MONTH

## Jewish Board of Family and Children's Services Advancing Standards of Practice for 130 Years

With more than 185 individual programs, over 2,800 full and part time employees and a \$175 million budget, the Jewish Board of Family and Children's Services is one of New York's largest human service organizations. It touches the lives of 65,000 people each year. Yet in many ways the Jewish Board is larger still. Its commitment to professionalism, training and the highest quality care and treatment have helped to advance standards of practice for the entire field. JBFCS is an active advocate, both as a coalition partner in the struggle to improve services and as an individual agency bringing its reputation and prestige to bear on behalf of the sector as a whole. "It is our contribution to the field" is a comment one hears frequently from people at all levels within the JBFCS. It is a testament to their pride in the Jewish Board's place and the responsibilities that position entails.

JBFCS traces its history back more than 130 years to the founding of United Hebrew Charities (UHC) in 1874 and the Jewish Prisoners Aid Society (JPAS) in 1893. UHC was created to coordinate the work of smaller Jewish charities and by 1899 its women physicians were delivering as many as 900 babies at home each year. JPAS began serving adult prisoners and their families and expanded to serve delinquent boys, founding the Hawthorne School in Westchester in 1906. Over time, these two organizations would continue to grow and evolve, eventually becoming Jewish Family Service and the Jewish Board of Guardians. Their merger in 1978 created the Jewish Board of Family and Children's Services.

Today, JBFCS' programs meet an extremely broad spectrum of individual needs. It provides services for the adult mentally ill, adolescent services including substance abuse treatment, early child development and children's day treatment programs, children's residential treatment, community counseling, family violence programs, preventive services, refugee assistance, Jewish community services and much, much more.

There is, however, a consistent theme. "Our core competency is mental health," says Alan Siskind, Ph.D., who has led the organization as Executive Vice President and CEO since 1991. "While we offer a number of different services, all of our programs are informed by our mental health expertise. Everybody who comes to us gets an assessment so we can understand what they need and we develop a treat-

ment plan based on their own lives and needs."

### Gateways to Service

"We are a large gateway for people who have a full range of human service problems," says Paul Levine, Associate Executive Vice President, who will succeed Siskind upon his retirement in October. "We have 12 mental health clinics in the five boroughs. We also have a large array of offsite consultants who work on-site in many synagogues and other community settings to give people who need help access through their local institutions where they are comfortable."

This network of community programs serves a broad sweep of New Yorkers. "Mental health is about all of us," says Siskind. "We all exist on a continuum with mental health, just as we do with our physical health. Sometimes we are doing better on the continuum than other times. But I never met a single soul in my life who couldn't benefit from knowledgeable support at some point."

"We are the place you come to if you are dealing with depression or you have a child who is not doing well," says Levine. "We serve people from all socioeconomic groups. There aren't many providers out there doing this."

The Jewish Board's Center for Child Development and Learning is another frontline resource for parents seeking help for young children struggling with a range of problems. The Center, which operates out of locations in Manhattan, Bronx, Brooklyn and Queens, provides comprehensive assessments and center-based therapeutic educational programs for preschool and younger children as well as community and school-based services for preschool and school-aged children. The Louise and Henry Loeb Therapeutic Nursery School and clinic, located at JBFCS' 57th Street headquarters building, serves 100 3-5 year olds and their families. The Special Education Itinerant Teacher (SEIT) Program allows pre-school children to remain in their own mainstream nursery classroom through the provision of direct one-on-one work with the child and close consultation with the child's teachers and parents.

### Meeting Extreme Needs

While the Jewish Board's community programs attract a wide range of clients, the agency also specializes in serving those with the most serious mental health problems. "JBFCS has services for certain populations with extreme needs – very disabled populations, people who have already experienced multiple psychiatric hospitalizations, young children with pervasive developmental disabilities," says Levine. "I see that as a core for this agency, caring for the most disturbed kids, the most troubled adolescents, the most profoundly disabled."

This philosophy, for example, explains JBFCS' work involving family violence, says Levine. The agency operates three domestic violence shelters accommodating a total of 171 women and families, an advocacy program, and outreach services. "We run domestic violence shelters because those families are probably the most challenged families in the city,"

says Levine. "Not only are they experiencing all kinds of issues related to family functioning and often mental health and substance abuse issues but they are also bruised and battered and their lives are at risk."

Residential treatment for troubled youth falls into the same category. "Residential treatment is for those kids who are at the furthest end on the spectrum of need and we have some real capacity to do effective work there," says Levine.

JBFCS has offered residential youth programs for a full century, beginning with the Hawthorne School in Westchester. Today, that same 100 plus-acre campus houses three separate residential programs. The Hawthorne Cedar Knolls Residential Treatment Center (RTC) serves 104 boys and girls aged 9 to 18. Two Office of Mental Health-licensed Residential Treatment Facilities (RTFs) are also located there: Linden Hill School, a 55-bed co-ed RTF, and the Jerome M. Goldsmith Center for Adolescent Treatment for 40 boys.

The agency's other children's residential programs include Geller House, the Henry Ittleson Center, Kaplan House and the Mt. Vernon Girl's Residence.

### Treating Trauma

While the Jewish Board may have a long history of providing residential care, it has not allowed itself to be bound by tradition. Over the past decade, the agency has almost completely redesigned its approach to treating the needs of its young clients.

During the 1990s, JBFCS' Chief Psychia-



Alan Siskind, Ph.D.



Paul Levine

trist Dr. Robert Abramovitz began exploring the relationship between trauma and the problems confronting many of its clients. "Bob found that there were histories of trauma in a very high percentage of cases, both adults and kids," says Levine.

## A Commitment to Undoing Racism

At first glance, the Jewish Board of Family and Children's Services (JBFCS) seems an unlikely organization to take on the fight against institutional racism. Yet, as with its focus on trauma, JBFCS has come to see Undoing Racism as a defining aspect of its culture and the services it provides.

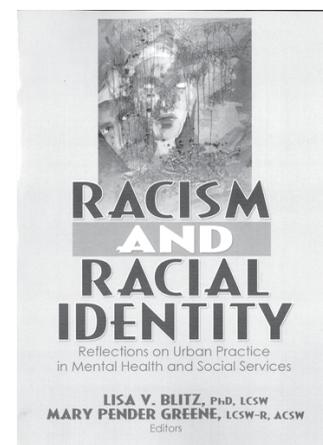
"The goal is to make sure our clients of color are getting the best possible care and we think that doesn't happen if an organization doesn't look at its own issues of race," says Alan Siskind, Ph.D., JBFCS' Executive Vice President and CEO. JBFCS has drawn upon the Undoing Racism work of the People's Institute for Survival and Beyond to help it understand the ways in which institutional racism impacts society in general and the social service system's own efforts to assist clients. "It has become clear that you can have very good intentions about sensitive and culturally competent practice but unless you look at the issues that get in the way, you may not be able to deliver on those good intentions," says Siskind.

"You can't claim clinical excellence and culturally competent practice without understanding race and racism," says Mary Pender Greene, Chief of Social Work Services.

As with its earlier trauma work, JBFCS has utilized its Scholars-in-Residence program to help move the Anti-Racism agenda. The last two Cohen Chairs have been occupied by experts in institutional racism – Dr. Ken Hardy and Drs. Nancy Boyd and A.J. Franklyn. David Billings of the People's Institute has occupied the Pauline Falk Chair in Community Education and Research.

"We mandate that all our middle managers attend People's Institute's Undoing Racism workshops," says Associate Executive Vice President, Paul Levine. "Eighty have to attend and close to sixty have already gone, many of us a couple of times."

In early February, JBFCS celebrated the publication of "Racism and Racial Identity: Reflections on Urban Practice in Mental Health and Social Services". Edited by Lisz V. Blitz, Ph.D., JBFCS' Genesis Domestic Violence Shelter, and Pender Greene, the work includes chapters by many JBFCS staff examining the role of race and racism in social work practice.



# AGENCY OF THE MONTH

## Excellence Through Training and Education

The Jewish Board's commitment to staff development and in-service training is renowned throughout the local human services community. Employees at all levels are offered a broad range of opportunities to advance their skills and their careers.

"Training is a signature of the agency," says Siskind. "It obviously has an important impact on quality. It is a risk management tool. It also is important for staff recruitment and retention."

"I think it is one of the things that makes it attractive to work here," says Levine.

The Martha K. Selig Educational Institute, JBFCS' umbrella for all training activity, is a veritable university of training opportunities. Chartered by the New York State Board of Regents, its 32-page catalogue features everything from one-day workshops in treatment techniques, casework documentation, supervision and management to three-day certificate courses and two-year Advanced Training Programs in Child, Family and Group Psychotherapy.

Twice a year, all JBFCS professional staff can take a full week's worth of courses, broken up into one-day sessions over a five week period. "That is our bread and butter in-house training," says Levine. "We also have advanced training. People who have been with us three or four years and want to develop a specialization in child/family treatment can take a two-year program. They give a half-day and we give a half day."

Specialized training programs are offered by JBFCS' array of in-house institutes: the Adult Milieu Services Training Institute, American Mental Health Services and Education Center, Center for the Study of Social Work Practice, Institute for Child Care Professionalization and Training, Institute for Infants, Children & Families; and the Mt. Sinai School of Medicine Partnership.

"We have a 50 hour certificate program, Excellence in Child Care," says Frank Delano, LMSW, Director of the Institute for Child Care Professionalization and Training, part of JBFCS' ongoing effort to enhance the role of its direct care personnel in residential programs. The program features Cornell Therapeutic Crisis Intervention, basic child development, the ABCs of residential child care, cultural diversity, GLBT youth and using recreation as a therapeutic activity. A complimentary 60-hour program has been developed for child care supervisors. "It's unique in the country," says Delano. An endowment allows JBFCS to offer \$1,000 stipends to staff who complete the programs. "At this point, about 60 supervisors and over 100 child care workers have graduated," says Delano.

Supplementing these training courses are JBFCS' leadership and mentoring programs designed to assist staff in better understanding the agency's culture and broad array of service areas. "They bring together people from different parts of the agency," says Mary Pender Green, Chief of Social Work Services. "They get to know each other and learn about programs in other parts of the agency."

"Once you think about this kid having had long term, extensive exposure to trauma, childhood sexual abuse and violence, there are certain things you can expect to see," says Abramovitz. "If you don't attend to those issues you are not going to succeed." He estimates that 70% of youth in residential programs have histories of trauma.

In typical fashion, however, JBFCS didn't stop there.

"Bob essentially defined the clinical theme for this agency," says Levine. "We are fortunate enough to have an endowed chair, like at a university, through which we bring in top people in mental health to work with us on specific issues. The theme for the first several years of the Saul Z. Cohen Chair in Child and Family Mental Health became trauma."

Bessel van der Kolk, MD, a professor from Harvard, spent two years working with JBFCS on the physiological impact of trauma. "He helped us understand that people needed to be helped to gain some control over their emotions before they could go back and solve the trauma issues in their lives," says Levine.

In 1998, Sandra Bloom, a psychiatrist from Philadelphia, began working with JBFCS to adapt her Sanctuary® model, a program that utilizes a therapeutic community approach to deal with client trauma, for use with adolescents. The Jewish Board began piloting the new approach at Hawthorne Cedar Knolls in 1999 and has subsequently rolled it out for the entire Westchester campus.

"We have found it extremely helpful," says

Lenny Rodriguez, JBFCS' Assistant Executive Director and Director of Children's Residential Services. "The Sanctuary® Model has helped us to reduce our level of incidents dramatically." The program empowers youth to understand their own history of trauma and loss, develop personal safety plans for coping with emotional reactions to trauma-related events and envision a future better than their past. "Most of the kids here have experienced loss that is traumatic," says Rodriguez. "They have lost a parent, been moved around from foster home to foster home." Kids in the Sanctuary community learn to help each other in dealing with trauma and safety issues – another vehicle for improving their own sense of mastery and control.

The Sanctuary® Model also empowers JBFCS' direct care staff to be what they already are – full fledged members of the therapeutic team. "We are developing new roles for the staff," says Rodriguez. "They are moving away from behavior management and spending more time talking to the kids about trauma and safety plans. The kids come to them when they feel stressed."

The Jewish Board's recognition of trauma as a widespread and fundamental cause of many emotional and mental health problems now guides all of its treatment programs.

## Collaborations

One new initiative highlights both JBFCS's trauma focus and its ability to bring mental health and programmatic expertise into partnerships with other service providers.



Founded in 1906, JBFCS is celebrating the centennial of its Hawthorne Cedar Knolls Residential Treatment Center in Westchester.

Child welfare agencies have long struggled to obtain mental health services for children in foster care. Simple referrals to community mental health programs often break down in the face of logistical obstacles -- missed appointments, emergency replacements, an inability to connect with family members. In response, JBFCS has piloted a new model which outposts JBFCS therapists full-time at foster care agencies where they can provide direct treatment for children living in foster boarding home programs.

"We got funding from the Hasbro Children's Fund, Ira W. DeCamp Foundation, Edward and Ellen Roche Relief Foundation and The Merrin Foundation to put therapists in two agencies for two years," says Levine. The programs were piloted with Good Shepherd Services and Seamen's Society for Children and Families. "It was a real partnership. Therapists offered mental health training for foster parents and caseworkers. They began screening kids, consulting on cases, sitting in on permanency hearings and building caseloads."

The results have been impressive. "We cut the replacement rate from 25% to 9%. Basically, we did a lot of treatment and prevented the breakup of viable foster care arrangements," says Levine. In some cases, the program also identified foster home situations that were not likely to have successful outcomes for the child, leading to replacement with more positive results.

Now, the initiative is expanding with five other mental health providers applying for OMH approval to establish satellite offices in foster care agencies. "The evidence that you can dramatically reduce re-placements is so tangible," says Levine. "It translates into shorter lengths of stay in foster care. If you can get to work on the permanency plan in a stable environment, kids don't have to stay as long."

Levine believes that there are many ways in which the Jewish Board's expertise can help other service providers. "We have teams of staff located in every ACS field office in Brooklyn," he says. "They have expertise in mental health, substance abuse and domestic violence to assist field office staff in making decisions about removals and service plans. It is a way for different organizations to sit down, roll up their sleeves and work together to solve problems. We would like to do a lot more of it."

The agency has begun working with outside organizations to provide trauma services in preparation for or in response to traumatic events. "We were recently called in to a private school where a student had died in an accident over the weekend," says Levine. "We had five staff there Monday morning working with teachers and the other students."

JBFCS' impressive array of training programs (See: box at left) is another way in which the agency shares its expertise with the broader nonprofit community. Each year, more than 1,000 staff from other agencies attend workshops or certificate courses at JBFCS' Martha K. Selig Educational Institute. The Jewish Board's staff also take their training on the

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