

Debi Weiner retires from JFS Dallas, 30-year career

After a 30-year career at Jewish Family Service of Greater Dallas (JFS), Debi Weiner is retiring from her post as Senior Director of Older Adult Services. This organization has Debi to thank for so many services for the Older Adult community, including in-home care management and counseling, indigent burial, caregiver support groups, grief support groups, community chaplaincy services, transportation services, a guardianship program, and so much more. Her leadership and vision has secured hundreds of thousands of dollars in government grant funding and private funds to ensure the growing older adult population will always have JFS as a resource in the Jewish community and greater Dallas area.

Early years at JFS

Debi, a native of Detroit, moved to Dallas from Chicago in 1980 and quickly made rich relationships in the Jewish community. Like many, she first became acquainted with JFS Dallas as a volunteer, when Annette Wolk (z"l) OBM, invited her to deliver Kosher Home Delivered Meals together. She continued to volunteer until her children, Allison and Russell, became school-aged and she was able to return to work.

In 1991, Debi was hired at JFS as a Case Manager. Her department, then referred to as the Gerontology Department, was run by Bunny Radman and the organization was led by Chief Executive Officer, Arnie Marks, and the President of the Board of Directors, Lynda Newman, Ph.D.

At that time, Jewish Family Service was operating out of the basement of the Jewish Federation of Greater Dallas with a small but dedicated staff of 30 people, along with the Resettlement operation.

Bunny Radman was Debi's predecessor and mentor who spearheaded many of the social service programs JFS continues to provide today. Debi had no idea at that time how much she would come to learn from Bunny. She thought back to her first day on the job when she was sent out to visit clients in their homes. She knew to her core that she could help.

When asked about her interactions with those first few clients, she recalled thinking to herself, *I know these people - they're just like my parents and the families I grew up with in my own community.*

“There was something that felt very right to me, like I could make a real difference here,” Weiner said. “So Bunny decided to take a chance on me, and I decided to take a chance on working with Older Adults for the first time. That was 30 years ago and I honestly haven’t looked back since,” Weiner said.

Deep roots in the Jewish Community

The thought that Debi has worked with generations of families – grandmothers, mothers, and now adult children is a perfect example of what makes JFS feel so much like family. While the agency has expanded to serve the needs of the greater Dallas area, she shared that she appreciated the balance of taking care of our own AND having the resources and responsibility to improve the lives of people from the greater Dallas area.

All Jewish Family Service agencies across the country, as a part of the Network for Jewish Human Service Agencies (NJHSA), were founded in the early 1900’s (and earlier for some) because Jewish people at that time had nowhere else to turn to in times of need. Debi values being a part of this network.

“This organization is at the heart of all Jewish communities – it’s where we work, where we volunteer, where we help each other...It’s sacred,” Weiner said.

Debi has worked alongside Ariela Goldstein, Senior Director of Clinical Services, for the past 26 years. Together, they have led teams that made JFS a well-recognized provider for clinical counseling in the greater Dallas area.

“Debi’s care for her clients, her staff, and community has no bounds,” Goldstein said. “Her compassion, infused with a depth of knowledge and professionalism, has impacted not only her work with her clients and colleagues, but with the entire agency and community at large.”

Growth and Expansion of Programs

In the 1990s, JFS had many of the familiar social services it still has today including Kosher Home Delivered Meals, as well as Transportation, Homemaker, and Lifeline

services. However, Debi was a Licensed Clinical Social Worker and was the first staff member to add counseling to the array of services for Older Adults. Debi is credited for laying the groundwork to provide psychotherapy in the Older Adults Department at JFS that we know today.

After more and more older adults were utilizing the **age-specific counseling services**, she encouraged JFS to look into Medicare reimbursement, which has saved the agency hundreds of thousands of dollars over the years and allowed for that money to be allocated to other important services for Older Adults. In fact, adding counseling was so successful that whenever there was an opportunity to expand, JFS chose to hire more LCSWs.

“Our program really evolved over time to provide that counseling component,” Weiner said. “This in-home service was something that no one else in the community was doing at the time.” It’s very hard to access counseling when you’re homebound, so it was a natural extension to provide a service to meet the clients where they are. “We found that when you can meet their mental health needs it directly helps them to remain independent in their homes.” Debi shared that she is most proud of this addition under the agencies’ vast array of mental health and social services. “Being able to provide a treatment for depression and other mental health concerns can change a person’s life, and thus enable them to live independently.”

Bunny Radman and her team launched the **Holocaust Survivor Support program** in 1998. The agency was contacted by an individual who moved to Dallas from Florida who reached out to ask if we had similar services funded from The Conference on Jewish Material Claims Against Germany. Not long after, JFS responded to meet that need by launching the program, and it has been able to grow and impact many people tremendously through the years. Under Debi’s leadership, JFS was able to also secure grants from Jewish Federations of North America, Network of Jewish Human Service Agencies (NJHSA), Kavod, and Uniper to help Holocaust survivors in the Dallas/ Fort Worth area with counseling, psychotherapy, care management, financial assistance, technology, and non-medical home care to help maintain their independence and quality of life.

In 2019, Debi helped hire a full-time dedicated Clinical Psychologist for Holocaust Survivors, Yaffa Podbilewicz-Weinberg, Ph.D., and knows that this service is in incredibly capable hands. Many of these survivors live in our community but were not connected to the resources available to them. They needed our services but didn’t know how to access them because of language or transportation barriers. “Now, with dedicated and targeted support, JFS has been able to reach and serve 57 Holocaust

survivors during COVID-19. Previous to Covid, we didn't even realize how many survivors were in the community! We now believe there are many more. As you can imagine, I'm very proud of that too," Weiner said.

The Older Adult Services department continued to expand when Debi became the Director in 2000, working under the leadership of Michael Fleisher, longtime Chief Executive Officer, who retired in 2017 after 23 years.

"As Debi reflects on her long, productive career with the agency, I hope she feels a bit overwhelmed with all she has contributed and accomplished here. It is very impressive," Fleisher said. "I hope she knows that she is surrounded, in person and in spirit, by many people who have great respect for her as a person and professional and who have benefited from her expertise."

It was evident that there was a real need for **Jewish grief support groups**. For many people in the community, it was more comfortable as there are so many religious and spiritual elements that come up when sharing. "People have said to us that they are so appreciative to have an intimate setting to connect within our own community," said Weiner.

These support groups as well as **caregiver support groups** have taken many forms over the years. Whether it be in collaboration with several local synagogues, offering off-site 6-week grief support series, monthly support groups, virtual support groups, paired with individual counseling, and more, both have been considered staples of the Older Adults department for almost 25 years.

Indigent Burial is another important service offered by the agency in collaboration with the Jewish Federation of Greater Dallas. This program handles everything from an assessment of the need, arrangements with the funeral home and cemetery, and secures a Rabbi for the burial. When an unaffiliated individual needs an indigent burial or needs assistance from a Rabbi, JFS used to call around town asking Rabbis to help outside of their usual commitments to their congregation. As Jewish tradition says to bury loved ones quickly, it was important to have a Rabbi who was available on short notice. While, of course, they all helped where they could, it was a welcome change to have one individual dedicated to providing this service.

Our **Chaplaincy** program was started at the encouragement of Rabbi Howard Wolk. He approached Michael Fleisher about starting a Chaplaincy program at JFS. Rabbi Wolk accepted the role 14 years ago and has made a tremendous impact on the Jewish

community ever since. Debi and Rabbi Wolk have partnered to continue to identify and meet the needs in the community.

“For those many years before there was the position of Community Chaplain, Debi fielded all the inquiries regarding the unaffiliated and hospital visits, end-of-life issues, and burial. I was proud to step in and help,” Rabbi Wolk said. “Debi has always been patient, thoughtful, and considerate. These qualities and others contributed to a great working relationship and are vital to all human interaction. She will be sorely missed at the office.”

The Kosher Home Delivered Meals program was originally operated in partnership with and through Golden Acres for many years. After the agency found there was a greater need for that service, Debi was integral in facilitating the application process and ongoing reporting to receive funding from Dallas Area Agency on Aging (DAAA), Texas Department of Agriculture and Dallas County. She also connected the dots to partner with the Jewish Community Center (JCC) to provide frozen meals in this new fashion. For the past 25 years, that grant has allowed us to expand our service area as well as continue to provide food for individuals that keep Kosher.

While it is clear that Debi has helped service expansion in huge strides and set the foundation for these to continue well into the future, it would be hard to cover every impact she has made on this community during her long career. It is also clear that she embodies what JFS is all about – finding ways to improve and evolving to meet the needs in our community.

Evolving & Looking Forward

When asked what word encapsulates her experience working at JFS, Debi said without hesitation, “Evolution – JFS has evolved and changed so much over 30 years. We know we can’t sit still... The world is changing and we have to change with it. I’m so proud of what we’ve accomplished together. Not one person or organization can do it alone.”

The agency has been able to adjust and respond to whatever challenges have impacted our community. She recalls being a part of the team during responses to circumstances including Russian Resettlement, to Hurricane Katrina, Ebola, Hurricane Harvey, the 2019 Tornados, and of course, with the pandemic.

When the pandemic hit, it wasn’t clear if older adults were going to be able to take advantage of technology to connect with their counselors and social networks. But the

staff and clients evolved. The pandemic showed that service delivery can and does need to change in many ways. “Going forward, we will continue to have a multi-access, hybrid model to provide services in the home and virtually,” Weiner said. Watching her department grow in this way was one of the most rewarding things to witness as she finished her final year at JFS.

With the needs constantly changing, she feels confident that the agency is in good hands under the leadership of Cathy Barker, Chief Executive Officer.

“I think I have an eye for spotting talent and there is certainly a lot of it at JFS – in every department,” Weiner said. “I’m very, very fortunate to be surrounded by dedicated professionals who take the responsibility of serving our community seriously. It’s been one of the greatest gifts of my career to work with such wonderful people.”

“It has been an honor and a privilege to work alongside Debi Weiner these past 11 years,” said Barker. “She leads with her heart and a passion that is unparalleled in this profession. Services to older adults in our community are accessible, comprehensive and impactful to the individuals and families we serve due to her tremendous efforts.”

Deborah Leibensberger, LCSW will be stepping into the leadership role as Director of Older Adult Services in January 2022. She has been working with Debi at JFS for 19 years. Debi shared, “Deborah is an exceptionally caring therapist and supervisor to staff,” Weiner said. “I can’t think of a better person to continue the wonderful progress we’ve made for the Older Adults in our community.”

“Debi’s kind, compassionate, intelligent and dedicated leadership have served to inspire and motivate not only myself but the entire agency,” Leibensberger said. “We wish her health, happiness and new adventures in her next journey.”

As for Debi, she is looking forward to spending more time and traveling with her husband Doug, children Allison and Russell, and their grandchildren Abby, Sophie, and Talia.