



We give help.  
We give hope.

## **Assembly-Human Services Committee Meeting Testimony January 27, 2016**

Presentation made by Marla Meyers, MSW, Executive Director,  
Samost Jewish Family and Children's Service  
1301 Springdale Road, Cherry Hill NJ 08003  
(856) 424-1333

### **Introduction:**

Good morning. Thank you so much for offering me an opportunity to testify. I am Marla Meyers, Executive Director of Jewish Family and Children's Service of Southern New Jersey. I am here today representing the New Jersey Consortium of Jewish Family and Children's Service Agencies of which there are 12 in total throughout our state. Our consortium makes a difference for upwards of 100,000 clients in the state of New Jersey on an annual basis. JFCS are in place to help the most vulnerable in our communities regardless of religious, race or ability to pay. Most of our clients have very limited funds if any at all. We help folks from cradle to the elderly with a host of programs and services. You name, we probably do it!

### **Focus Areas:**

I will focus on 4 significant areas today.

**Seniors**- First is the growing senior population. As people are living longer, aging in place, they become more fragile and infirm; they are outliving their savings, often existing on social security and meager pensions. Seniors are a huge focus for all of the JFCS organizations. We offer a host of services from case management, counseling, and support groups, to home health aides, companions, meals on wheels, food from our pantries, and patient advocacy. In addition, we have the awesome responsibility for taking care of 850 needy Holocaust Survivors who live throughout New Jersey. (7700 in total) Many of us focus on the unique needs of veterans as a subset of the senior population and work with our local governments in order to patch such services together. Major areas of concern for our seniors include increased poverty as their funds run out, food insecurity, mental health issues, dementia, lack of caregivers, and transportation. Agencies like ours are a lifeline and will be even more needed as boomers age and people live longer.

**Food insecurity**-When SNAP benefits were cut over two years ago, agencies like the JFCSs felt the burden deeply. Most of us host food pantries in the various counties that we fund on our own through private dollars and donations. As the SNAP cuts went into effect, referrals from other agencies unable to meet the needs were directed to JFCS's. Many of us have experienced a 20% increase in need each year during the last two. In our case in Southern NJ, we served 5500 people in 2014 and then 7000 in 2015. Stats show that the number of seniors and children who need food from pantries like ours is absolutely on the rise. It's hard to witness. And it's hard to keep up with the needs. We have to raise funds and conduct food drives constantly to keep our 3 food pantries filled. Last year our agency alone gave out over \$200K worth of food. FEMA assisted with about \$15K and the rest was raised or given in-kind. The effects of food insecurity on the family structure are tremendous-children can't concentrate and learn, adults can't work at an optimum level and seniors become more frail.

**Domestic Violence** is a huge issue faced by JFCS's throughout the state. In fact, Project SARAH (Stop Abusive Relationships at Home) emanates from Clifton JFS and provides inspiration and resources throughout the state. From safe houses to pro bono legal assistance, to counseling, JFCS's are here to meet the needs of families suffering from abuse. As for poverty-victims often rely on their partner as the wage earner and are unable to exist without them; often, skills have gone through the cracks making the victim vulnerable and unable to acquire employment which would allow them to support themselves and their children. Mental health issues pervade the family and debilitate. Children have trouble in school, food insecurity and legal issues abound. Poverty is often imminent if the victim doesn't return to their abuser.

**Mental Health Supports**: In order for people to have the tools they need to survive and succeed in our fast paced society, they need to have full mental 'health'. Mental health is at the forefront of our efforts. Unfortunately, only some of us can subsidize one on one counseling services enough to keep them going. In general, mental health counseling is available to those who have access either through private insurance through jobs or private pay. For those suffering from mental illness, the inaccessibility can cause a schism in one's potential for employment, making good choices and ultimately being self sufficient.

### **Summarizing the Major Issues**

- Lack of affordable and quality vocational supports throughout state for those who are unemployed, underemployed or senior and need to go back to work. We sought out 150K of private funding to run our program for 100 people this year. If that money goes away so does our program.
- Lack of affordable mental health counseling, related to aforementioned populations and also to the opiate and heroin crisis.

- Need for more food banks or funding for agencies such as JFCS's to meet all of the food related demands.
- Lack of funding for transportation programs for seniors and veterans to get to medical appointments and socialization. Again we sought out \$50K of private funding for our Take the Wheel Program wherein veterans drive other veterans to medical appointments. If it goes away, so does this great program.

**Potential solutions:**

- More county and state dollars to support programs like our vocational service, food pantries, and social work services. Agencies like ours need funding for existing programs not just new initiatives which most grants look for. When funding is based on a 'wide impact' agencies like ours can be hurt as hundreds or even thousands of clients is seen as a small measure of impact.
- Incentives and support for agencies to combine efforts and streamline.
- Matching funds from public sources
- More mental health clinics and safe houses