

# Hamilton Jewish Family Services AGM June 25, 2024 Executive Director's Report

This report is a testament of the great things HJFS has been able to do in our community thanks to the amazing support of our donors, members, staff, funders and volunteers.

HJFS could easily have been one of the many agencies in this city that had to shut their doors by December 2023. This was the grave prediction from those intimate with our financial position in April 2023. To reverse this, many steps were necessary. These included a focus on the financial wellness of the agency; concentration on preserving the core program and services; an interim leader that was able to provide outside perspective and help implement difficult solutions; and a change in financial view based on our true costs for each program. These difficult choices and resulting pivot have positively contributed to creating a new path, with an eye on the past, knowing the agency can survive change and continue to serve our community.

In August 2023, almost the halfway mark of the fiscal year, I joined HJFS in a part-time capacity as our new Executive Director. My initial plan of action was to walk it back just enough to get a clear view of where we had come from. This was how I would figure out where we were going. I would be an observer-gatherer and then forge ahead, methodically with intention to make the greatest impact. Of course, this is not the way it happened. Instead, I hit the ground running, and like every other Jewish-focused organization, we learned how to continue serving and operating to make a positive difference while living under the dark shadow of the crisis in Israel and around the world.

This organization has been here for almost a century, since 1929. Its most fundamental guiding principle has always been to serve the needs of the community's most vulnerable – to be a safety net. As these needs change, we listen and respond to make the greatest possible impact with our hard-earned charitable dollars and grant funding. We are accountable to the community, and we are so proud to say it.

In the Jewish text *The Ethics of the Fathers*, Ben Zoma states, *"Who is wise? One who learns from every person."* I would like to thank each of the HJFS staff, board, volunteers, donors, funders, and clients who contribute to our, small but mighty, agency – both in actions and ideas. I learn from each of you, every day.

## **About Hamilton Jewish Family Services**

HJFS serves a critical role in the Greater Hamilton Jewish community. Guided by the Jewish value of Tikun Olam, we help those who are at-risk, who are low-income, who are marginalized, and the community as a whole. We help individuals and families across generations achieve stability, independence, well-being, and communal life, all in keeping with Jewish values and traditions. Between 2011 and 2021 the Hamilton Jewish community increased by 260 people, or 5.1%. This increase marks the second consecutive decade in which the community has shown a population gain. The current total represents an historical peak for the Jewish population in Hamilton. As a multi-service organization, we are continuously identifying and responding to the ongoing needs and challenges of the community through our main areas of service: Poverty Reduction (Financial Assistance), Holocaust Survivor Program, Seniors Services, Food Security (Kosher Food Bank), and Mental Health & Well-being. These streams of service are interconnected and together provide a holistic *hand-up* to those in need.

## **Our Gratitude to:**

Hamilton Jewish Federation, Government of Canada, Government of Ontario, City of Hamilton Hamilton Food Share, United Way of Hamilton- Halton, Hamilton Community Foundation, Holocaust Claims Conference, The Cummings Centre, Herb & Cece Schreiber Family Foundation, Ministry of Seniors & Accessibility, Dundas Rotary Club, Trillium Foundation, Bertram Foundation, Lewar Fund, Mazon Canada, TD Friends of the Environment, Dundas Ward 13, our donors, our volunteers.

## 2023-24 Program Highlights

**Financial Assistance Program (Relief):** On a national average, 14.6% of Jewish adults and 15.8% of Jewish seniors live below the poverty line. 16.6% of Hamiltonians and 17% of Hamilton Jews live below the poverty line. A lack of income creates serious barriers for people such as unaffordable housing, mental health issues and physical health issues. The Financial Assistance Program provides monthly and emergency funds to eligible clients to help them offset their living expenses, stay in their homes, and avoid precarious living situations. This assistance is intended to be short term to help the client get through a tough time. It is the expectation when a client is on-boarded to the program that they will embrace the hand-up in conjunction with other supports and referrals offered by HJFS. Available exclusively to those in the Jewish community, we adhere to clear policies and guidelines in accordance with best practices from similarly sized JFS agencies across North America.

- Clients Served: 43 households received monthly financial assistance and seven households received emergency assistance.

The number of clients seeking financial assistance fluctuates based on community needs, and we anticipate a surge of both emergency and longer-term requests due to factors like immigration, cost of living, and economic conditions. With an expected increase in individuals arriving from Ukraine and Israel, which we've already observed, it's imperative to account for this shift.

**Holocaust Survivor Program:** HJFS staff work cooperatively with the Claims Conference in Germany and Hamilton Jewish Federation to provide critical support to 15 holocaust survivors. The program provides the survivors with much-needed home care & cleaning services, medical & emergency funds so they can age at home, as well as other supports such as grocery vouchers, and holiday gifts. Our Holocaust survivors rely on HJFS to facilitate the program, advocate on their behalf, and ensure that their evolving needs are met. Our holistic case manager provides attentive, tailored support to each of these clients on a daily/weekly/monthly basis and liaises with their family members to help them navigate through government channels and other situations, such as medical needs and end-of-life care.

**Life Navigation, Advocacy and Referrals:** In the last year, we provided 327 referrals in the community or in-house through the senior supports program. Many of the referrals were for housing (Hamilton Help Centre, Hamilton Housing Division, Access to Housing; Homecare agencies; Hamilton Special Supports program; ADP – Assistive Devices programs; Hamilton Community Legal Aid, and Ontario Works/ODSP. Individual advocacy is available for those who find it challenging to make decisions about their health, financial situation or shelter.

- Collaborating with J-Welcome Home Hamilton and JIAS, Toronto to support the needs of a handful of newcomers from Israel, both individuals and families, including food bank, financial assistance onboarding, referrals and mental health.

**Food Security:** Food insecurity is tightly linked to housing insecurity. According to the Hamilton Food Share, food bank usage in Hamilton went up 35% between 2021-22. It went up another 43% from 2022-23. Wards 1 and 13, where most of Hamilton’s Jewish community resides, saw a 25% increase in food bank usage between 2022 and 2023.

Carol’s Cupboard is the only kosher food bank West of Toronto, in Ontario. Two staff and many volunteers keep the program running efficiently. Clients can visit monthly and receive non-perishable food, fresh produce, kosher meat, cleaning, and hygiene supplies. The amount of food they can take is in proportion to the size of their family. Carol's Cupboard uses a grocery store model; clients come and shop for what they need. This gives them agency and ensures they get what they need. For those unable to come to the food bank, they make their order over the phone and their food is delivered by a volunteer. To preserve client confidentiality, comfort and safety, services are by appointment only.

#### **Food bank stats 2023-24**

- 690 In-person visits
- 227 deliveries
- 83 Average number of visits / month
- 66 new clients (of which 42, or 64%, fit within our catchment).
- 379 unique individuals who benefited from the food bank
- 30,960 lbs of food distributed

### **Food Bank Updates:**

- January 2024 policy update pausing the distribution of grocery store vouchers.
- Received \$5,000 grant from the Dougher Foundation to increase the selection of cleaning and hygiene items.
- Expanded the HJFS gardens by building eight new garden beds to grow produce for Carol's Cupboard.
- Raised over \$20,000 and provided baskets to over 70 families for Rosh Hashana.
- Our foodbank, financial relief, and seniors' program clients received a gift of Matanot L'Evyonim when the Purim campaign raised over \$11,000 Mitzvah dollars.
- Had the opportunity to do community outreach to discuss the food bank and HJFS to BBYO students and Temple Anshe Shalom's breakfast club.
- Receive food from Temple Anshe Shalom and the HHA's Chanukah food drive.
- Brought in groups of elementary school students to help in the food bank and learn about food insecurity.
- Grateful to be the April beneficiary of Kehila Heschel's Tzedakah Fridays.
- Provided Passover baskets so that 70 households received everything needed to enjoy the Passover holiday and enjoy a beautiful seder meal. Special note: the revenue generated and spent for Passover 2023 actually *passed-over* our fiscal year 2023-24.
- The Purim campaign raised over \$11,000 Mitzvah dollars. Our foodbank, financial relief, and seniors' program clients all received a gift of Matanot L'Evyonim.

**Seniors Services:** In the Hamilton Jewish community, the number of seniors increased dramatically in the last decade. Seniors comprise 26.8% of the community, a historical high. In comparison, seniors comprise only 18.2% of the general Hamilton population. The HJFS Seniors Services, as a recognized Seniors Active Living Center, provides an environment for older adults (often unaffiliated) to participate in social, cultural, and educational activities to facilitate lifelong learning, combat isolation, improve quality of life, and enable extended independent living.

A lot of time and energy has been spent thinking about the direction of the seniors' program. In the 2023-24 year, we created a new unofficial strategic plan for the program. We are excited about our plans to refresh, refocus and expand the services and programs for seniors of all ages, stages, and abilities. Starting in the Fall 2024, there will be a monthly calendar with a diverse array of events and activities that cater to the interests of the wide variety of seniors in the Hamilton Jewish Community.

- 2023-24 Participation of 130 unique individuals in programs

**Mental Health & Well-being:** According to the CMHA more than 6.7 million people are living with a mental health condition in Canada. Affordable and accessible mental health programs are crucial to help facilitate early intervention, reduce the stigma of asking for help and contribute to a more inclusive and supportive community. We may never need to seek help for a mental health condition, but we will all know someone close to us who does.

- September 2023, a pause on mental health services to assess and rebuild a strategy that better served the needs of the community while ensuring long term sustainability.
- October 2023 launched an emergency response for short-term mental health support following October 7. More than a dozen members of the community signed up to donate their time and expertise. These professionals were then matched with people who signed up at the other end who expressed their need for help in coping better with the emotions, stress and angst affecting their everyday lives.
- December 2023 formed an advisory panel of community stakeholders to provided us with ideas, feedback and confirmation that we are on the right track.
- February 2024, in response to the expressed community need, combined with preliminary research and the support from our advisory panel of mental health experts, we launched the first phase of our reimagined Mental Health & Well-being program.
- Phase I offers a low barrier, free and fee-based workshops and programs focusing on awareness, prevention, and education. Our goal is to build an inclusive mental health program that provides accessible and effective support to individuals of all ages within our community.
- Foremost priority is to stay within our means and utilize only confirmed resources. Leveraging additional confirmed resources, such as grants, donations, and partnerships, will allow us to expand.

- In keeping with the 2024 Canadian Jewish Human Service Sector Public Policy Agenda, we are focused on: Raising the urgent need for increased mental health and addiction support in Canada and calling on the federal government and provinces to finalize Mental Health Transfer negotiations and implement funding as soon as possible; and highlighting how the rise of antisemitism has impacted the community's mental health and providing targeted investment to deal with this increase.

### **2023-24 Operational Highlights:**

- o Heightened security: we accessed existing security elements and identified incremental enhancements to implement for the sake of the safety and security of our staff and guests. This review was spurred by the current rise in antisemitism; however (and unfortunately) the problems are not new.
- o Grants: Applied to 44 grants, requesting \$1,301,058. To date, we've confirmed funds of \$379,197 enabling food bank renovation, tablet program for seniors, additional food bank items, security enhancements, and much more.
- o Completed an extremely complex 2022-23 audit.
- o HR systems clean up in progress following comprehensive review.
- o Update of many policies and guidelines.
- o Reviewed and renewed insurance policies for Board of Directors and General Liability & Property.
- o Transitioned our bookkeeping from QuickBooks Desktop to QuickBooks Online and manual financial processes to the cloud using Dext and Plooto.
- o Hired fractional financial officer and bookkeeping services to revamp our financial processes, enhancing accuracy and efficiency. This means strengthened financial operations and has increased our success with grant funding.
- o Focused our efforts on diversifying source of donor and funding dollars.
- o Over the top annual fundraiser event, Wine & Whimsy and the virtual silent auction, resulted in over \$45,000 of unrestricted funds raised.