

SUMMER 2025

DEFINING MOMENTS

JCFS
CHICAGO



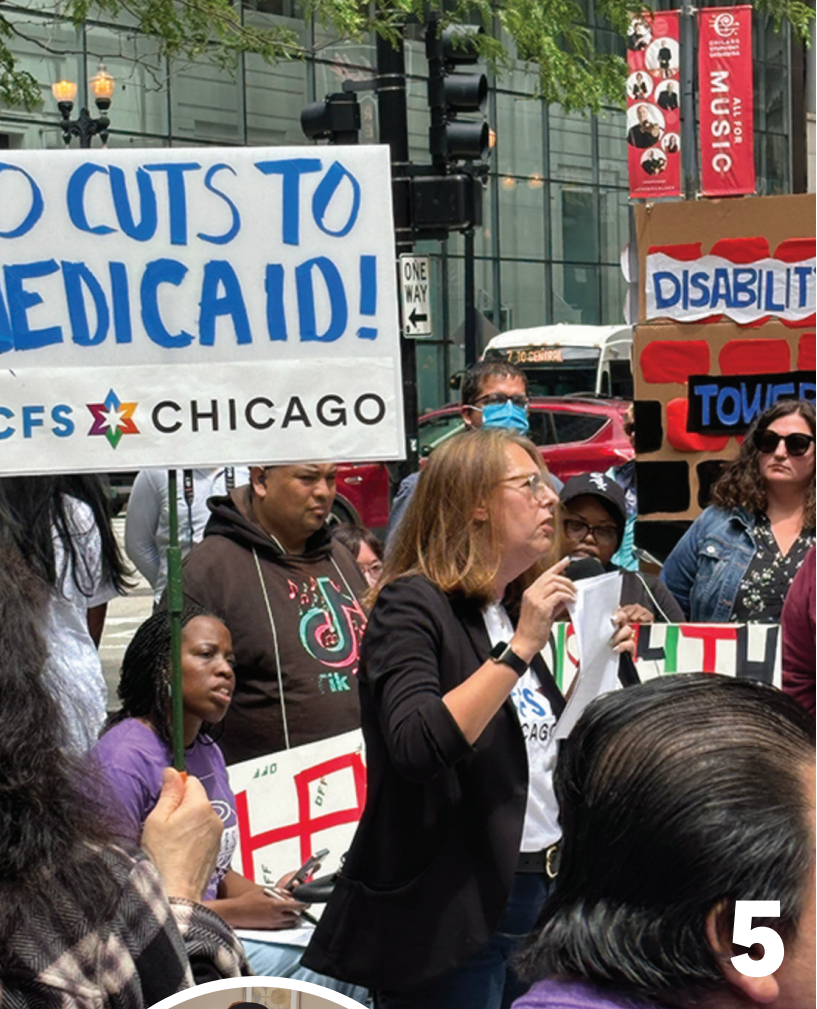


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ON THE COVER: Integrated Pediatric Therapies (IPT) provides children with comprehensive, individualized treatment plans tailored to their unique developmental needs.
Photo by Nijole Shuberg



Photo by Nijole Shuberg

Photo by Nijole Shuberg

NEWS FROM JCFS CHICAGO

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TELL ME MORE

Defining Moments print edition comes out once a year, but you can get updates, news, and events information in our bi-monthly email version. To subscribe, send your name and email address to Communications@JCFS.org or visit [JCFS.org](https://jcfs.org)!

JCFS Chicago is a partner with the Jewish United Fund in serving our community. We welcome people of all backgrounds. Our commitment to belonging is woven throughout our services, programs and welcoming workplace. Licensed by the Illinois Department of Children & Family Services. Accredited by the Council on Accreditation.



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Your support makes every meaningful moment at JCFS Chicago possible—from learning and growth to safety, connection, and opportunity.

Dear Friends,

Each day at JCFS Chicago is filled with meaningful moments—some joyful, some challenging, and all deeply impactful. In this issue of *Defining Moments*, you'll read about the diverse ways we support our community: from dog therapy and Jewish learning in our residential program, to an interactive play brought to life at the Knapp School. You'll meet an Afghan family building a new life with the help of our HIAS refugee resettlement team and see the empowerment sparked by our SMART Kids programming. These stories, along with updates on funding from our partners, open counseling opportunities, a supported employment success and our recent reaccreditation, reflect the depth and breadth of our mission.

Our heartfelt thanks go out to community members, sponsors, and supporters who made our signature fundraiser a success. The evening celebrated the inspirational work of JCFS and honored the leadership of Judy L. Smith and Alicia Oberman, whose impact continues to uplift our community.

At the same time, this past year has reminded us just how vital advocacy is to the future of JCFS and those we serve. Since January, we've stepped up our advocacy efforts, meeting with lawmakers, informing the public, and holding firm in our commitment to equity and care.

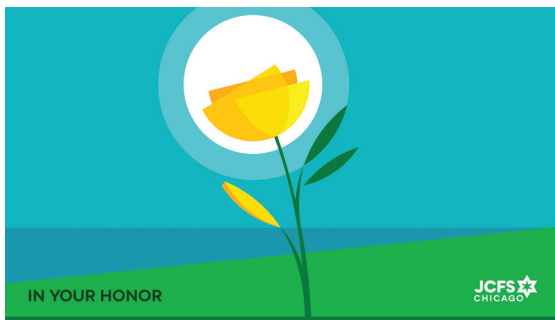
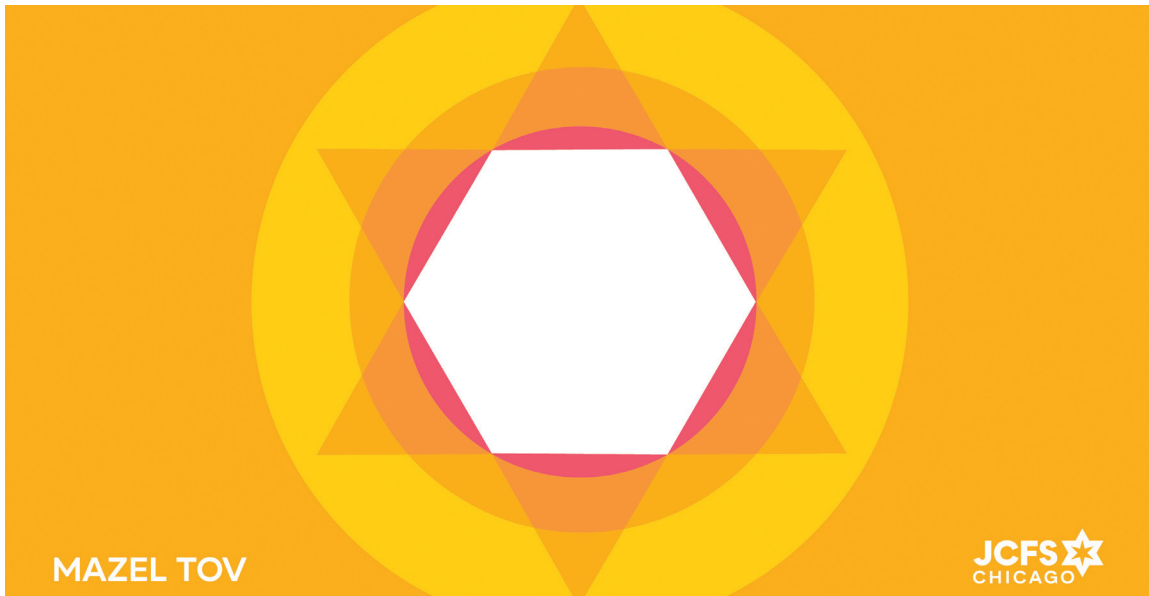
We're so grateful for your partnership, which makes this work possible, and we invite you to continue standing with us as we move forward together.

Stacey Shor
President & Chief Executive Officer

Celebrate Life's Moments

with

JCFS Chicago Tribute Cards



Whether you are honoring the memory of a loved one, celebrating a new addition to your family or marking the joyful rite of passage of B'nai Mitzvah, you can commemorate any special occasion with a gift to JCFS Chicago.

Every tribute card purchased provides help and healing care for the many children, adults, couples and families who rely on JCFS for counseling, pediatric therapies, special education, social and recreational opportunities, career support, community needs, services for people with disabilities and more.

Visit: www.jcfs.org/make-a-difference/tributes

ADVOCACY is **ESSENTIAL**

Whatever issue matters to you—immigration, disability inclusion, mental health care, public safety, or the environment—the passage of HR1 dealt a serious blow to those who can least absorb cuts to support and services.

In January, the new administration issued a stop-work order halting reimbursement for refugee resettlement services, affecting adults and children already lawfully in the U.S. This was the first signal that spurred JCFS Chicago's Federal advocacy efforts.

Since then, we've met with legislators in Washington D.C. and Springfield, mobilized our community to speak out, and kept the public informed about the impact these proposed reductions will have on JCFS services and the people who rely on them.

HR1 includes hidden provisions that enable long-term Medicaid cuts, marking a turning point in how we prioritize the well-being of people with disabilities, seniors, families, and children. These cuts:

- Reduce access to essential services, limit independence for people with disabilities, and strain families.
- Restrict mental health support, leading to worsening conditions and increased hospitalizations.
- Increase food insecurity by limiting access to SNAP, placing more pressure on social service systems.



Earlier this year, JCFS President and CEO, Stacey Shor (second from right) joined Federation lay leaders, staff and partners in Washington, D.C. for JFNA's Financial Vulnerability Fly-In, advocating to preserve Medicaid, protect SNAP, and reform the Social Security Savings Penalty.

Additionally, HR1 introduces stricter immigration policies by raising application fees, limiting benefit eligibility, and adding barriers in the immigration court system.

Although some provisions phase in over time, the \$930 billion cut to federal Medicaid funding may soon force states like Illinois to adjust budgets. JCFS will continue to assess the impact and advocate for the people we serve, speaking out when action is needed and ensuring our community's needs are not ignored.



Photos by Allen Bourgeois

LIGHTS, CAMERA, CONFIDENCE

Drama Enrichment Gives Students Creative Outlet

Knapp School & Yeshiva students have increased their confidence along with their creativity through participation in a drama program called Build A Play, offered by Northlight Theatre in Skokie. For the second year, teaching artists from Northlight have visited the school during the spring semester to encourage and guide students in a wide variety of acting exercises.

Students learned to develop characters, work with classmates to tell stories, improvise various scenes, put on performances and more.

“By participating in this program, our students have an opportunity to practice these skills in a

fun, engaging and hands-on way,” said school social worker Maggie Rose. “This program offers a space for our students to use their imaginations, express themselves, and practice active listening while others are performing.”

Northlight teaching artists Jay Donnan and Liam Collier led the enrichment program, which is funded by The Jules and Gwen Knapp Foundation, with each one teaching half the school’s classes once a week.

“The students had a hard time at first with being creative, working together and expressing their ideas in a theatrical manner,” Jay said. “Then by



Opposite page: Students participate in weekly drama class with Northlight Theatre's teaching artists. This page: Rabbi Rosenberg introduces the Build A Play program and students act and improvise during the June performance in the school gym.

the end of the year, the vast majority of students were happy to share their ideas and were eager to present what they've worked on."

At the end of the school year, the students showed off their newfound acting chops during a presentation in the school gym. They created superhero and super villain characters and answered interview-style questions about them from their peers, improvised with storytelling and selling "products" in a nod to the tv show Shark Tank (their version was called Whale Tank), pretended to be in a wax museum and put on a full performance called "The Harrowing Heist for Walt Disney's Head."

Before the assembly started, student artwork of the characters they developed was shown on a large screen.

"Knapp School & Yeshiva is committed to offering dramatic arts to students as a form of cultural enrichment," said Rabbi David Rosenberg, Director of Jewish Educational Studies. "Such

opportunities are frequently available to students in mainstream schools, and the fact that a student requires a therapeutic day school placement should not preclude such opportunities for them."

School social worker Liel Hagen said families shared positive feedback after the drama assembly, saying it was heartwarming to see their student successfully perform in this type of activity as it has historically been a challenge for some of them.

Liam said that as the students became more comfortable participating in drama activities, they also learned how to better express their own needs.

"It was incredible!" he said.

To show their appreciation, students and staff made cards for Jay and Liam which they presented to them after the assembly.

"This program has brought a sense of joy and creativity to our school community," Maggie said.

A NEW BEGINNING

With help from JCFS Chicago's HIAS Immigration & Citizenship, a family of nine Afghan refugees settled into a Chicago apartment after arriving in the U.S. just days before the new administration's inauguration. The parents and seven children reunited with an eighth son who had been living in the U.S. since 2021.

"This was the last case we received before the new administration suspended programs," said HIAS Case Manager Wahedullah Niazi, adding that all the services HIAS provides for refugees within the first 90 days are crucial for them and for the resettlement process.

These services include referrals to ESL (English as a Second Language) programs, as well as to our employment specialists, who guide refugees through the process of finding a job. HIAS also assists with applying for benefits, groceries and fare cards for public transportation, plus health screenings and immunizations.

"We have a good life right now," said the father in his native Farsi, during a visit in their kitchen in April.

The family is thankful they no longer live in Afghanistan, where they said their future looked

bleak. After the Taliban took over in 2021, they lost their home and their jobs—the father had been a laborer and an adult son had worked as a barber—and there no longer were opportunities for them to earn an income to survive.

They didn't have money for travel or passports in 2021, but were finally able to immigrate in January, joining their son who had sought asylum here before he even turned 18. That son opened a family reunification case with the Department of Foreign Affairs, and once his documents were processed, the International Organization for Migration (IOM) paid for the rest of the family's airfare to the U.S. The family has 36 months to pay back the loan.

The father and an adult son have both found work here. The son recently started working at O'Hare International Airport cleaning airplanes. The father will start doing similar work soon and another adult son is waiting on paperwork before he can start working. They say they look forward to eventually buying a car and a house, becoming independent and making a life here.

"We are happy overall with everything," the son said. "The only challenge we are facing is what will the new administration do to our status."

Even after following the proper processes to



An Afghan father and two of his eight children sit on the kitchen floor of their Chicago apartment in April. The refugee family arrived in the U.S. just days before the new administration's inauguration.

immigrate here, they still fear deportation. But they are grateful to agencies like JCFS Chicago and the funding that has helped them with their transition.

Shannon Ericson, Director of HIAS, said the program continues its longstanding work supporting refugees and has maintained most services—except for airport pickups and apartment set ups, which have paused due to a

halt in new arrivals since the new administration took office.

“We are still providing case management, employment and legal services for refugees, asylees, Ukrainian arrivals, and the community seeking immigration services,” Shannon said.

Wahedullah said the family has faced some challenges since arriving here, but overall they are acclimating well.

“The process is going smoothly for them,” he said. “They’re happy.”



Rabbi David Rosenberg and several residents who live in the integrated community living homes supported by JCFS. Photos by Nijole Shuberg

RESIDENTS FIND CONNECTIONS

W

hether through weekly Jewish learning sessions, visits from therapy dogs to their homes or trips to the local library to participate in a book club, residents of the integrated community living homes supported by JCFS Chicago are making connections. They are connecting to their Jewish heritage, their emotions and moods, as well as their community.

WEEKLY CLASS LINKS RESIDENTS WITH JEWISH LIFE

Every week for over fifteen years, Rabbi David Rosenberg visits one of the adult living homes supported by JCFS to teach a Jewish Learning class to a small group of residents.

“In our community, Rabbi Rosenberg is a super star,” said Letícia Cardoso, Director of Residential Supports. “His commitment to our department has been invaluable, steady and indispensable.”

Each Monday at 4pm, Rabbi Rosenberg engages the residents with Jewish stories, videos and music.

“I’m very attentive to the fact that each resident has a different cognitive capacity,” he said, adding that there are residents who can read, residents who can’t, residents who can participate more in conversations and discussions and those who are just very pleased to be a part of a Jewish learning experience.

“A lot of what I’m doing is bringing serious meaningful Jewish concepts to them in a way that is approachable and engaging,” said Rabbi Rosenberg, who is the Director of Jewish Educational Studies at JCFS, and spends his days teaching at the Knapp School & Yeshiva.

When he joined the staff at JCFS in 2007, Rabbi Rosenberg

Rabbi Rosenberg engages with residents during their weekly Jewish Learning class.



**“They want to be connected to Jewish life
the way their neurotypical family members are.”**

— Rabbi Rosenberg,
Director of Jewish Educational Studies

began visiting the residential homes. The class grew organically from his visits and from residents’ suggestions, he said.

“I’m aware that it’s possible for a rabbi to go in and give some sort of a talk,” he said. “But that wouldn’t be very engaging.”

Instead, Rabbi Rosenberg likes to mix it up when it comes to class content. He said the residents especially enjoy watching YouTube videos, such as a rabbi discussing the week’s Torah portion, and tv shows with Jewish themes like *Shtisel* and *A Small Light*. They also spend time listening to Jewish music groups, such as Six13 and The Maccabeats, as well as talking about upcoming Jewish holidays. Rabbi Rosenberg said he often pauses videos to discuss the content and make sure it’s making sense to the residents.

“I think a guiding light for

me in my relationship with the residents is that regardless of their abilities, or their cognitive or social emotional challenges, they’re looking for connection the way anyone is looking for connection,” Rabbi Rosenberg said. “They want to be connected to Jewish life the way their neurotypical family members are.

“And this is an opportunity to reach them where they are and for them to feel that they are having a serious Jewish learning encounter on a level that is appropriate and that speaks to them.”

Letícia said the class plays such an important part of the residents’ week and their connection to their traditions.

Rabbi Rosenberg would agree.

“It’s very meaningful to me,” he said. “It’s been a highpoint of my week.”



Residents attend a weekly book club at the Skokie Public Library.

BOOK CLUBS FOSTER COMMUNITY TIES

Several residents supported by JCFS have been participating in book clubs – first via Zoom, at the beginning of the pandemic, and eventually in person at the Skokie Public Library. The 11-15 residents read about three chapters at their weekly meetings, but they gain so much more than what’s on those book pages.

“These groups are a great idea because they’ve opened social and educational opportunities for our residents,” said Denise Pugh, Supervisor of Residential Supports. “As they continue to be introduced to community resources, our staff gets to witness their excitement and

growth in these areas.”

Since the groups started meeting at the library, individuals from other agencies have joined the two book clubs, and the enjoyment of the residents has flourished, Denise said.

Before the start of each book club meeting, participants have time to interact and socialize, sharing everything from their latest accomplishments and family news to recipes they’ve tried.

“They have interacted with people they know from their community and met strangers they now call friends,” Denise said.

Skokie Public Library Volunteer

Accessibility Specialist Dawn Wlezien said the library received a grant from the local Skokie community fund, which paid for the library to receive training and purchase an array of books for the program, called Next Chapter Book Club.

“The mission of the book club, ‘Let’s Get Together Book Club’, is to provide meaningful opportunities for lifelong learning, social connection and authentic community engagement for people with developmental disabilities with all reading abilities,” Dawn said. “It is not about learning to read but to learn about reading.”

As for the books that are

“The pride in this accomplishment is visible on the residents’ faces and everyone encourages one another, no matter how much or how little they choose to participate.”

*— Denise Pugh,
Supervisor of Residential Supports*

chosen each season, Denise said they are appropriate for all skill levels and include classics such as Huckleberry Finn and 20,000 Leagues Under the Sea. There is a review at the start of each meeting to refresh everyone’s memory, and then the participants take turns reading the new chapters aloud.

“No one is left out as staff and volunteers are on hand to tutor and engage in ‘echo reading,’ where residents are partnered with skilled readers who allow the residents to follow along and repeat back the sentence they just heard,” Denise said. “The pride in this accomplishment is visible on the residents’ faces and everyone encourages one another, no matter how much or how little they choose to participate.”

Dawn agreed, saying, “Over the years I have seen individuals grow. During their first few sessions, they might pass, but by the fifth time, they are comfortable enough to read and even share their thoughts and opinions regarding the story.”



Nurse Janis Goodman and a resident interact with a golden retriever therapy dog.

PAWSITIVE IMPACT: THERAPY DOGS CONNECT RESIDENTS TO EMOTIONS

Residents have also benefited from some four-legged visitors in recent months. Nurse Janis Goodman arranged for certified therapy dogs to spend time at the homes, providing residents the opportunity to interact, relieve anxiety and relax.

Janis set up the visits through Alliance of Therapy Dogs, which trains the dogs and their volunteer handlers to bring their furry friends to the homes, one at a time.

“So far everybody has been very excited,” Janis said. “It’s been very positive on both sides. The volunteers who have brought their dogs have given me a lot of positive feedback, too.”

Each visit lasts about 30 to 45 minutes. Residents who choose



to participate can spend time with a pup, which is proven to reduce anxiety and improve mood. For our program, it provides an added bonus of enhancing social interaction skills

with guests (human and canine) and peers, Janis said.

Residents have interacted with a variety of dogs so far, including two golden retrievers, a black lab, a cavapoo, a shih tzu and some mixed breeds.

Janis said the idea for the therapy dog visits stemmed from a conversation she had with Director of Residential Supports Letícia Cardoso. Both Janis and Letícia have fostered dogs, and they know how much emotional support the animals can provide.

“We just thought, wow, wouldn’t it be great to try this!” Janis said.

ELEVATE

We are grateful for the incredible community that made our signature fundraiser Elevate, a success. Over 300 people came together to hear inspirational stories about the work of JCFS Chicago, and to celebrate Judy L. Smith (Irving B. Harris Leadership Award) and Alicia Oberman (What's Possible Award). Their leadership elevates our community in so many ways.

Thanks to our sponsors and generous supporters we raised nearly \$420,000 to lift our neighbors, offering strength, support and hope when it's needed most.



Event co-chairs Andrew M. Glick and Jessica Lorber with JCFS CEO Stacey Shor (m.)



Audrey Selin and Robert Weisman



Honoree Judy L. Smith and guests



Ali Stone, Sam Smith, Michael Smith, Judy L. Smith, Gary Stone, Debbie Garten



Honoree Alicia Oberman and Liz Roberts Turnipseed



Neil Posner and Patti Paone



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Goldie Wolfe Miller, Alicia Oberman; Liv, Izzy and Hannah Oberman;
Margo Oberman, Aaron Oberman



Michael Reese Health Trust CEO
Ameya Pawar and JCFS CEO Stacey Shor



Tmima Wakschlag, Laurie Wakschlag, Milt Wakschlag,
Vince Everson, Efraim Wakschlag, Hart Suskin

Photos by Nijole Shuberg

NOTEWORTHY NEWS

A PERFECT MATCH

When Sam wanted to find a job, he turned to the JCFS Duman Opportunity Center, which is committed to helping people with disabilities find and maintain meaningful employment.

He and his dad attended an intake appointment with Barbara Sinclair, a Duman employment specialist, who conducted extensive discovery to learn what kind of work Sam enjoyed.

"We really want to make a good match," Barb said.

And that's just what they did.



Sam became employed at PlayWorks Therapy Inc. in Chicago a couple years ago, working independently after six months, Barb said. Sam works three days a week and has a running list of tasks he completes as a clinic aide. On Fridays he teaches yoga to younger children.

His employer, Kyle Gibson, Director of Operations at PlayWorks, said Sam has become an integral part of the clinic, which provides speech, feeding, occupational, and physical therapies and social work.

"The enthusiasm he brought with him was really exciting for us," Kyle said. "You could feel that Sam wanted to be here and wanted to be part of our clinic."

"I love this job," Sam said. "I come to work and I feel supported."

Visit our YouTube channel @JCFS Chicago to hear more from Sam and watch him at work.

OPENINGS FOR COUNSELING AND PEDIATRIC THERAPY

The compassionate and skilled clinicians at JCFS Chicago are here to help! We have openings for counseling at our Chicago/West Rogers Park, Skokie and Northbrook offices. For more information call 855.275.5237 or email Ask@JCFS.org.

We also have immediate openings for pediatric speech-language and occupational therapy in Northbrook and Chicago/West Rogers Park. For more information, call 847.412.4379 or email IPI@JCFS.org.



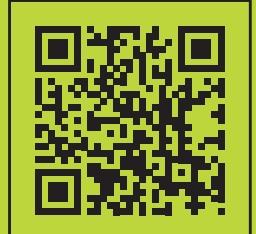
Find the list of participating insurance networks at [JCFS.org](https://www.jcfs.org) or scan the QR code.

WE ARE HIRING!

Join our passionate, dedicated and talented team and experience the impact you can make in the community. We are hiring for the following positions and more.

Special Education Teacher
Direct Support Professional
Occupational Therapist
On-call Nurse

To apply or explore our current job openings, visit [JCFS.org/careers](https://www.jcfs.org/careers) or scan the QR code.





YOUNG LEARNERS EMPOWERED BY SMART KIDS

This year, the SMART Kids abuse prevention program reached over 1,600 students across preschool through fourth grade in Jewish day schools throughout the Chicago area. Through engaging, age-appropriate lessons, SMART Kids empowered children with tools to recognize their feelings, respect body boundaries, seek safe helpers, and speak up when something doesn't feel right. Staff trainings and parent workshops ensured a consistent message across school communities, reinforcing that safety is a shared responsibility.

"One of my favorite moments from this year was visiting nursery classrooms," said Bracha Jakofsky, JCFS Abuse Prevention Coordinator and Mental Health Educator. "At first, the students were hesitant to engage — but by the second week, they were excited to see me, and by the fifth week, they were excited to share the safety rules and were proudly singing the SMART Kids song word for word. It was a powerful reminder that with consistency and repetition, even the youngest learners can understand, internalize, and feel empowered by our SMART Kids program."

SPARK JOY AWARD

Rosa Johnson, a paraprofessional at the Knapp School & Yeshiva, recently received the school's first Spark Joy award for her dedication to empowering students and exemplifying the spirit of 'sparking joy' within the school community. Rosa was presented with the award at Knapp's graduation ceremony on June 13.



COUNCIL ON ACCREDITATION

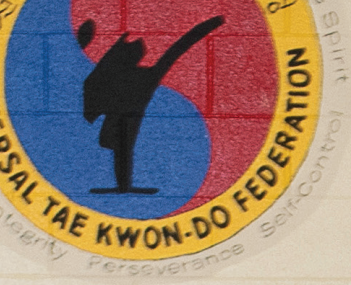
JCFS Chicago recently achieved reaccreditation through the Council on Accreditation (COA). The COA review team visited in May and commented on our level of preparation, the way we meet people's needs, our safe and secure buildings, our staff, and the phenomenal work we do day in and day out.

RESPONSE FOR TEENS



FUNDER SUPPORT KEY TO JCFS STABILITY

JCFS Chicago appreciates the crucial funding and strong partnerships we have with foundations and corporations like the **Lillian and Maurie Lipsey Endowment Fund for Jewish Community Enhancement**, which supports our mission to strengthen self-sufficiency, belonging and well-being among individuals and families in the Jewish and broader Chicago communities. Generous grant funding provides an important source of stability to maintain vital services and expand programs to meet growing needs across our communities. The Lillian and Maurie Lipsey Endowment Fund for Jewish Community Enhancement has been a long-time supporter of JCFS Response for Teens. Response supports young people, ages 9-25, and their families, empowering them to make healthy choices in all areas of their lives. We are deeply grateful for the Fund's longstanding support of LGBTQ+ youth needs in the Jewish community. This critical partnership has helped sustain Response's dedication to supporting Jewish LGBTQ+ youth during a time of spiking mental health needs among teens, growing hostility towards the LGBTQ+ community and rising antisemitism.



CLASS OF 2025

Fourteen students graduated (nine from high school and five from 8th grade) during Knapp School & Yeshiva's 51st Annual Commencement ceremony in June.

Photo by LeJean Easley



WAYS TO GIVE



\$1000

provides two weeks of in-home respite for caregivers of a loved one with a disability.



\$500

provides a job-seeker with career counseling and placement services.



\$250

supports two weeks of counseling for an adult struggling with depression.



\$100

provides hygiene kits for a refugee family.



\$50

provides a child with a gift through the JCFS Holiday Gift Drive.

Donate now



[JCFS.org/donate](https://jcfs.org/donate)

DEFINING MOMENTS

The mission of JCFS Chicago is to strengthen self-sufficiency, belonging, and well-being among individuals and families in the Jewish and broader Chicago communities.

Matt Mann, a resident of the integrated community living homes supported by JCFS, collects carts at his job at Mariano's.

