

## **The Jewish Women's Foundation of the Berkshires (JWF)**

### **Rising to the Challenges of the New Non-Profit Landscape**

Susan Friedman, JWF Board Member

For the past 16 years, the Jewish Women's Foundation of the Berkshires (JWF) has pooled resources from its members, now totaling nearly 200 women, to assist local efforts that improve the lives of Berkshire County's most vulnerable. Through grant funding and social action, JWF members support local nonprofits in their efforts to address basic needs, promote self-sufficiency, and youth empowerment.

May 30, was the deadline for JWF's 2025/26 grant applications. Even before the shift in national funding policies came into effect, the number of requests to JWF increased by 20%, with 40 applications received, in contrast to 32 grant requests for the year prior.

Linda Noonan, co-chair of The JWF Grants Committee noted "Our members were challenged by the wide range of needs our applicant address, and impressed by the commitment and expertise of these organizations. We were pleased to be able to fund more grants than ever before, but still recognize the needs are greater than our capacity."

To get a better understanding of the impact of the current climate on Berkshire nonprofits, on June 9th the JWF hosted 30 of its 2024/25 grantees for a day of recognition and dialogue. More than 100 JWF members attended the event and heard from local nonprofit grantees about the challenges and financial short falls that they were experiencing in the face of the new public funding environment.

Summarizing the current climate local that agencies face, Jessica Vecchia, Executive Director and Co-Founder of Roots Rising noted: "In today's challenging funding environment, private philanthropy is more critical than ever...it is what allows Roots Rising to sustain and grow programs that empower youth and strengthen our regional food system--work that is urgently needed and only possible with community support."

Brennah, a Roots Rising Youth Crew alum, added that she and so many other Roots Rising volunteers, whose work is supported by grants from the agency's local funders such as JWF, have been inspired to strengthen their community through the local food system. "I believe that when we are well-nourished, feel held by our community, and are in the right relationship with the Earth, we can show up as our best selves ...at the end of the day, food accessibility and a strong local food economy builds the strongest sense of home."

In response to the deep cuts to basic services here in the Berkshires, and the compelling data and client stories shared by its grantee agencies, the Jewish Women's Foundation of the Berkshires has increased its grant funding to local Berkshire community organizations more than twofold in the past two years – from \$70,000 in 2023/24 to \$100,000 in 2024/25 and up an additional 40% for 2025/26- from \$100,000 to \$145,000. Many JWF members stepped up in response to the budget cuts that are devastating the delivery of critically needed local services by providing additional financial resources beyond their JWF membership fee.

The JWF grants committee, open to all members and this year comprised of more than 40 women, carefully reviewed all the requests. As a result, a total of \$145,000 in grant funding will be provided to the following 28 local agencies this fall:

**Berkshire Bounty, Berkshire Center for Justice, Berkshire Community Diaper Project, Berkshire County Head Start, Berkshire Film and Media Collaborative, Berkshire Grown, Berkshire Horseworks, Berkshire Immigrant Center, Berkshire Music School, Berkshire South Regional Community Center, Blue Rider Stables, Inc., Community Legal Aid, Inc., Construct Inc., 18 Degrees, Elizabeth Freeman Center, Inc., Flying Cloud Institute, Gladys Allen Brigham Community Center, Greenagers Inc., Literacy Volunteers of Berkshire County, Pediatric Development Center, Railroad Street Youth Project, Roots & Dreams & Mustard Seeds, Roots Rising, South Community Food Pantry, The Guthrie Center, The People's Pantry, UCP of Western Massachusetts, Volunteers in Medicine.**

Along with its support to local Berkshire nonprofits, JWF provides additional funds through the Jewish Federation of the Berkshires for local, national, and international Jewish organizations and programs. For 2025/26 JWF is supporting the following organizations including:

**Changemakers, UMASS Hillel, Williams College Jewish Association, Haifa Women's Crises Shelter, the Ethiopian National Project; World Central Kitchen, Jewish Federation of Los Angeles;** to assist the fire victims, and **Project Hope, Camp Kimama,** to help the Israeli children who were impacted by the events of Oct 7<sup>th</sup> spend time at Half Moon camp for much needed healing.

A feature of each JWF local grant, which is unusual in the world of philanthropy, is that each new grantee agency is assigned a JWF member as a volunteer Grant Liaison. Grant Liaisons work to strengthen the relationship between the grantee and JWF and assist in broadening connections and accessing technical assistance for their nonprofit.

Unfortunately, despite the significant increase in funding, not every grant request could be supported. JWF additionally provides its local communities grantees with assistance through a number of volunteer efforts. Particularly throughout its grant process JWF reaches out to its grant applicants with requests to identify their volunteer needs which JWF's volunteer

coordinator then seeks to match to members' interests and abilities, both on an individual and group basis. Two such recent volunteer initiatives included sponsoring local food packing events to address food insecurity where JWF members packed 175 bags of fresh food that were delivered to several food pantries. The reusable bags contained enough food to create a hearty soup, a recipe card, and a \$20 gift card. In addition, JWF members formed into volunteer work teams that for two days fully staffed the Designer Showhouse event sponsored by Construct, the leading nonprofit provider of affordable housing in Southern Berkshires.

The JWF recently became a member of the Non-Profit Center of the Berkshires. JWF is looking for partnerships with other area funders to maximize the impact of its grants and volunteer initiatives and to extend its reach to more fully support its local grantees and the communities they serve.

Summing up the JWF experience and engagement, Carol Striker, JWF co-president noted "JWF stands out in its membership and unique philanthropic approach. Our diverse membership includes both full-time and seasonal Berkshire residents. Through grantmaking, social and volunteer activities, we have created a collective sisterhood of women who have formed lasting friendships while engaging in activities that build bridges into the community, addressing the unmet needs in our county."

JWF brings the Jewish concept of Tikkun Olam to life in the work that it does and the support it provides to the broader Berkshire community. Its tagline "Moving forward by giving back" is integrated into every aspect of its work. The connections that JWF has built with its local nonprofit partners and through them to their clients, tangibly demonstrates the value the Jewish community adds to the local Berkshires community, and promotes mutual respect and understanding.