

JAFCO creates loving homes for children who don't have one

BY DONNA HUFFAKER EVANS *SPECIAL TO THE MIAMI HERALD*
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Sarah Franco, executive director of JAFCO, in one of the children's rooms at the Mahler Family Complex in the David Posnack Children's Village in Sunrise. SAM NAVARRO *Special for the Miami Herald*

At first glance, the collection of terra cotta roofs and stucco walls look like any number of South Florida homes nestled inside a gated community. This neighborhood, though, tasks itself with one main mission: Protecting children.

The Children's Village is one of three sites operated by Jewish Adoption & Family Care Options (JAFCO), a nonprofit agency that provides services to abused and neglected children, and those with disabilities.

The Sunrise facility features a round-the-clock emergency shelter and six group homes. The 5.6-acre property offers a neighborhood aesthetic that includes a bike path, swimming pool and basketball court.

"The essence of what we do here is protect the children," said JAFCO Executive Director Sarah Franco, who's been with the organization since its inception in 1992.

While the goal of foster care is reunification with the family, that is not always possible given the home-life circumstances, she said, noting JAFCO's reunification rate is 50 percent.

At the Village's six group homes, children may stay on until the age of 21.

Currently, three young adults in those homes are attending Florida colleges, Franco said.

While the term "emergency shelter" may conjure images of sterile surroundings, the brightly painted recreation room at the Children's Village is filled with donated toys, books and adult and kid-sized furniture — not to mention flat-screen TVs and the young residents' art work.

The nursery boasts three cribs and a chair suitable for rocking newborns. On a recent weekday, Franco did just that with the 3-month-old girl clad in a panda onesie.

"She's catching up," Franco said smiling: Just 3 pounds when she arrived, the baby now weighs roughly that of a sack of potatoes (about 10 pounds).

JAFCO staff cares for the baby during the day while her foster parents work.

A "BLESSING"

Thus far unable to have any children of their own, Jennifer and Jared Richter of Coconut Creek consider the act of fostering "a love bridge to help children feel whole."

Jennifer Richter said they tried to navigate the byzantine process of becoming licensed foster parents through another agency, but often were left with more questions than answers. If possible, they would like to adopt the little girl.

"JAFCO is a blessing," she said. "I mean, we're first-time parents, so knowing they've got a team of people who can help you — every time you call — it's a beautiful thing."

Another JAFCO site is Eagles' Haven in Coral Springs.

Following the 2018 mass shooting at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School in Parkland, JAFCO created a wellness center for the school community.

Funded by multiple organizations, Eagles' Haven offers current and former students, parents and family members a place to grieve and heal through support groups, exercise, resiliency workshops and a variety of outreach programs.

A third way that JAFCO serves the South Florida community is through its Children's Ability Center, also in Sunrise.

The facility provides family support, child enrichment, respite and therapies to children with diagnoses such as autism, cerebral palsy, spina bifida and Prader-Willi Syndrome, a rare genetic disorder that results in physical, mental and behavioral problems, including a constant sense of hunger.

The property houses a gym, art, music and drama studios and a six-bedroom, six-bathroom respite to provide parents and caregivers time to relax and focus on themselves for a bit.

Franco said the usual challenges of parenting are compounded when you are caring for special needs children.

That's why support groups, education groups and respite services are so critical.

"There's a lot of tears. We just want to be that safe place that when a family is in crisis, they can come in or speak to someone immediately," she said.