

## JAFCO resumes respite services following death of autistic child



Susan Stocker / South Florida Sun Sentinel  
A team of technicians with United Restoration wipes down work surfaces with disinfectant while doing a deep clean at JAFCO Children's Ability Center in Sunrise, which has resumed respite care.



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Jewish Adoption and Family Care Options in Sunrise reopened its center for children with special needs immediately following the [tragic death](#) of Alejandro Ripley, a 9-year-old autistic boy from Miami.

JAFCO, an organization that provides services to abused and neglected children as well as those with developmental disabilities in South Florida, has resumed offering respite services to parents of the organization's Children's Ability Center, which was closed due to the coronavirus, who are in crisis. After school activities, weekend activities, overnight ability and other in-person resources are also back at the center. The organization is also opening its summer camp on June 15 at half capacity and will follow safety guidelines.

Sarah Franco, JAFCO's executive director, explained why she feels these programs are important for parents with special needs children, even during the pandemic.

"If we weigh the risks of the pandemic and add all the safety precautions that are needed, and then weigh the risk of losing another child, the answer to me is very clear, because I feel like we can mitigate the risks of COVID with really good cleaning, sanitizing, hygiene, distancing, mask wearing and temperature checking. That's been proven to help."

Franco continued, "To really honor Alejandro's life and to ensure that his death can't be in vain, we have to at least use this incident to try to do everything we can to prevent another tragedy."

"While we can't prevent everything, we have to do all we can do, and we're doing our very best. We feel we can do it with reduced capacity as we have a large facility and a very dedicated staff."

The organization has received support from the Jewish Federation of Broward County and the Children's Services Council of Broward County. It has also partnered with the Friendship Circle chapters of Miami and North Broward and South Palm Beach, who are taking calls from parents of special needs children and offering them support.

Rabbi Yossi Harlig, co-director for the Friendship Circle of Miami, said through this partnership, the organization has started the Lifeline Project.

"We're going to set up a type of buddy list so when a parent of a special needs child comes to our programs, we will have another parent that has been going through the same challenges and responsibilities that he or she can talk to."

Harlig said the chapter hosted a virtual town hall meeting for special needs families following the death of Ripley.

"This tragedy hit people very hard because most of these families know the struggle of raising a special needs child and the beautiful part of it, so watching a mother lose that battle by doing what she did to her son was very upsetting. We knew we had to do more for families to give them the support that they need."

Sarah Biston, director of Friendship Circle of North Broward and South Palm Beach, said, "COVID has not been easy for anyone, let alone parents of children with special needs who have a lot more challenges to deal with on a day-to-day basis."

"The idea of a partnership was that JAFCO and the Friendship Circle are the major market share in the special needs community, and we have a lot of families who rely on us, count on us and lean on us, so naturally we would be a good partner to reach out to the special needs families to support and help them in anyway possible."

Visit [friendshipcirclemiami.org](http://friendshipcirclemiami.org) or call 305-234-5654 for more information on the organization's Miami chapter, or [floridafriendshipcircle.com/](http://floridafriendshipcircle.com/) or 954-970-9551 for the North Broward and South Palm Beach one.