

'How Can I Direct Your Call?' These People Certainly Know How

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To most people, the idea of sitting around and waiting for the phone to ring probably sounds like a fate worse than death. However, most people aren't Linda Roth.

For more than two decades, she's made it her life's work to answer all kinds of questions over the phone.

Roth is the director of Philadelphia's Jewish Information & Referral Service, or JIRS, a program of the Jewish Federation of Greater Philadelphia's Center for Social Responsibility. Along with JIRS associate Sandi Brecher and a few volunteers, Roth spends her days referring Jews (and some non-Jews, too) to a variety of social services throughout the region.

But these days, for a number of reasons, the phones just aren't ringing as often as they used to.

"It's happening across the country; it's not unique to us," said Roth. "More people are getting their information from the Internet."

The 54-year-old observed that folks tend to Google rather than call, adding that "the calls we do get often come from elderly people who are not Web-savvy."

When Roth started as a JIRS volunteer 23 years ago, the group took about 30 calls a day, but these days, it's down to about 10 (along with about a half-dozen e-mails). Perhaps the most frequent type of call nowadays comes from adult children of ag-

ing parents — not surprising, considering the statistics on aging in Philadelphia's recent Jewish population study that confirm this segment of the population is growing — calling about issues like declining health, making sure their parents can stay in their home or finding them social opportunities in the area.

According to JIRS statistics over the past five months (which Roth said are reflective of the bigger picture), more than 20 percent of callers are over age 60; less than 10 percent are younger than 30.

In addition to fielding calls and e-mails, Roth and her team also mail out information like "Shalom Neighbor" and "Shalom Baby" packets to those new to the area or people who are expecting. Much of her time, explained Roth, is spent verifying and changing contact information in a series of databases, as well as compiling new items like the organization's "Resources for Stressful Times" packet and a disability resource guide.

On a recent day, Roth and her staff handled calls from someone unsure of where to turn after his veteran's benefits were denied — she referred him to the local chapter of the Jewish War Veterans — and a person looking for low-cost dental care; she suggested contacting both the Pennsylvania Dentists' Association and Federation's Jewish Family and Children's Service.

In order to direct callers to the right place, Roth and her staff rely on several file systems,

including a central Microsoft Access database with more than 2,100 records that can be searched by keywords, like "Jewish war" or, as in the case above, "dental."

STARTED AS A VOLUNTEER

Roth came to JIRS as a volunteer shortly after her son was born in 1986. Back in those days, she said, staff members relied on a dozen loose-leaf binders that they'd quickly shuffle through to find the needed information.

She became a full-time professional with the organization in 1996, working closely with longtime JIRS director Lillian Youman.

"She *was* JIRS," Roth proclaimed of her predecessor, who retired three years ago.

"Often, people call with amorphous needs," such as general loneliness or a nonspecific need for services, said Roth, "and Lillian knew the questions — and taught me the questions — to ask to focus people to get the information to better aid them."

Callers to JIRS have to do the follow-up work themselves. But Roth said that since social services are being cut due to budgetary concerns these days, those who contact the agency don't always get the help they need.

That's led Roth to seek out a wider array of services as referral points, including Jewish and non-Jewish agencies at the local and national level.

Right now she's also getting requests for Passover seder information, whether from young families or seniors with nowhere



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to go, or folks coming into town on business and looking for a community gathering. She generally refers them to synagogues and Jewish groups in the area.

She also noted that she expects to get a slew of calls on the morning before the first seder from those looking for last-minute places to go. For those still looking, Roth has helped compile an online list of community gatherings, along with other useful tools, at: www.jewishphilly.org.

While the majority of calls and e-mails are often service-related, others are, well, less so.

Once, she said, she got a call requesting that someone judge in a kugel-baking contest; another caller wanted to know whether or not exercise guru Richard Simmons was Jewish.

And then there was the time someone found a ketubah in a parking lot, contacted JIRS and was able to return it to its owner.

Those two briefly exchanged thank-you letters, said Roth, but generally, she doesn't hear much from callers afterward.

"On the phone, often before I hang up, people will say thank you," she said, "and that's all the thanks I need." ♦