

# **Jewish Social Services of Madison: Kai Mishlove becomes the first BIPOC Jewish woman to direct a Jewish social services agency in the United States**

Posted on Wednesday, Feb 1, 2023

**>> WisPolitics is now on the State Affairs network. Get custom keyword notifications, bill tracking and all WisPolitics content. [Get the app or access via desktop.](#)**

**Madison, Wis. - 01/31/2023** — This past September, Kai Yael Gardner Mishlove joined the Jewish Social Services (JSS) team as the Executive Director. Having recently moved to Madison from Milwaukee, she brings over 30 years of experience providing advocacy and case management services in both clinical and community-based settings. “Advocating for and developing programs that stabilize and empower vulnerable communities has always been a major interest and focus of my career and aspiration”. She previously served as director of the Jewish Community Relations Council of the Milwaukee Jewish Federation, and has served on the boards of many other non-profit organizations, such as the Friendship Circle of Wisconsin, the National Council of Jewish Women-Milwaukee, Hillel Milwaukee, JCRC Milwaukee, South East Asian Literacy Project, Edot Midwest Jewish Diversity and racial justice collaborative, Pan African Community Association and more. After growing up in Chicago, she received her bachelor’s degree in political science from Boston University and attended graduate studies in Public Health at the University of Illinois. **Kai serves as the first BIPOC Jewish woman to head a Jewish social services agency in the United States.**

**Mishlove enters JSS at a time of transition in the organization.** Beginning as small, community-based social services provider in 1978, JSS has greatly expanded both its services and scope since 2020. Urgent refugee crises in Afghanistan, Ukraine, Democratic Republic of Congo, Haiti, and other areas motivated the

organization to **more than double its resettlement staff**, moving the total number of individuals resettled from 64 in 2018 to over 150 in 2021.

Additionally, **JSS has expanded its reach in other areas**, creating the Tim and Kathy Mazur Barrier Relief Fund to provide direct financial assistance to unhoused individuals and people in danger of losing housing, and hiring an additional social worker to help with case management. Mishlove aims to continue this growth by creating a “memory café” for seniors experiencing dementia, and support groups for those experiencing stressors related to addiction, social isolation, and hate.

**Combating antisemitism and all forms of hate are major issues Mishlove hopes to continue as a new member of the Madison community.** While directing the Jewish Community Relations Council in Milwaukee, she often fielded media requests on antisemitic incidents and learned firsthand about the breadth and magnitude of anti-Jewish hatred in Wisconsin. She also traveled to the southern border with Forward Latino to observe the challenges affecting migrants and humanitarian efforts of dept of human services and border patrol agencies. She also organized the AAPI Jewish Alliance to build bridges between the AAPI and Jewish communities and increase awareness regarding the increase of anti-Asian violence and antisemitism.

The issue is personal for Kai: “There have been many times in my life where I’ve felt like an outsider. We forget that human beings are multi-dimensional with various intersecting identities. There is a tendency to pigeonhole folks into categories that serve as neat boxes for what we think is the sum total of their experiences and what they represent; but this is often a superficial understanding based more on our lack of knowledge than their reality. We must find every opportunity to celebrate and honor the rich history and contributions of various cultures that have enriched our collective community. There is much wisdom to be gleaned from our elders to our newcomers. Our organizations must collaborate to support the healing needed in various communities suffering from intergenerational trauma”. **In her view, education and outreach are critical to creating change and securing resources.** She plans on prioritizing both approaches at JSS.

To that end, Mishlove is no stranger to bridge-building. **In 2019, she founded Tables Across Borders, a dinner series dedicated to breaking down barriers between communities** through food and commensality. At each event, a different refugee chef showcased a traditional recipe not easily found in restaurants, sharing their food, and by extension their culture, with the larger Milwaukee community. The event successfully brought people from all over the

world together, while providing a supplementary source of income for refugee families recently arrived in Wisconsin. “The success and never-ending interest in TAB convinced me that the way to combat hate is to find commonalities between cultures. In this case it was connections made over the “soul food” of various cultures.”

Mishlove intends on continuing this vital work in her new Madison home. JSS already serves as a nexus of support for many different communities, including refugees, seniors, Jews, individuals experiencing homelessness and more. In her new role, she feels as though life has come full circle by merging her career history with her passions as a BIPOC Jewish woman. “I am thrilled to build on the history and success of JSS while exploring more opportunities of engagement and support based on Jewish values.” **She is excited to continue moving the organization forward, growing to serve more people than ever while building and maintaining bridges along the way.**