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Home Found For Louise Wise Records

Spence-Chapin to house documents from closed adoption agency still being probed by state.



Adam Dickter - Staff Writer

Nearly 10 months after ceasing its operations, an adoption agency with Jewish communal origins has reached an agreement with a similar organization to house and manage documents from some 80 years of services.

The decision between the defunct Louise Wise Services and Spence-Chapin means that thousands of people whose lives were affected by adoptions will continue to have limited access to birth records and other material that might aid them with reunion efforts or health crises.

"They couldn't be in better hands," said Ronny Diamond, director of the adoption resource center at Spence-Chapin in Manhattan. "We will be able to give them the same information they received from Louise Wise based on state law."

Agencies are prohibited from providing identifying information about birth mothers, but other facts — particularly medical data — can be obtained from records.

Diamond said basic information about birth parents can be a starting point for adoptees trying to carry out a search on their own.

"It's very important that they know about that birth parent and have a sense of who that person was," said Diamond.

Those seeking to be reunited with children placed for adoption, or with birth parents, may enroll in two registries, one run by the state and one private. If a mother and child both join the registry, they will be notified of the match.

Diamond said Spence-Chapin, which adjoined Louise Wise on East 94th Street before the latter moved to new quarters, would provide free counseling and other services to former Louise Wise clients and adopted children. The cost of storing and administering the records will be paid by Louise Wise Services.

Both agencies date back to the early 20th century. Spence-Chapin is the product of a merger of two agencies that began in the early 1900s with the goal of moving abandoned children from orphanages to foster care.

Louise Wise Services was founded in 1916 as the Free Synagogue Child Adoption Committee by philanthropist and adoption advocate Louise Waterman Wise. The agency's original purpose was to find homes for Jewish orphans. Its mission changed over the years, as it increased its services to

family counseling, foster care and residential services for teenage mothers and their babies.

The agency shut down in February, citing substantial reductions in public funding and a \$1 million per year deficit. It was one of five agencies to close due to city funding cuts and a reduced foster care caseload.

Glenna Michaels, president of Louise Wise, said board members have yet to decide what to do with the agency's remaining assets.

"We will use [the funds] to carry forward our mission," said Michaels. "We have to decide the best way to use the resources, and when we do, we will announce it."

Earlier this year the state attorney general's charities bureau began investigating whether Louise Wise Services complied with state nonprofit regulations as it liquidated its assets by selling some \$20 million in Manhattan real estate.

The law requires that a charity obtain court approval before liquidating all or most of its assets. Louise Wise did not submit for such approval because it sold the properties individually over the course of several years.

"Our review of this matter is ongoing," said Brad Maione, a spokesman for Attorney General Eliot Spitzer.

Jerome Feniger, a past president of Louise Wise Services who had raised concerns publicly about the disposition of the agency's records, said he was "pleased" to learn about the agreement with Spence-Chapin.

"I'm very pleased that an agency with the distinction of Spence-Chapin has agreed to do this and that it will be handled well," he said.

But Feniger said he remained interested in how the remaining assets are spent.

"My concern is that the money available, when all is said and done, [should] go for causes in the mission of Louise Wise," he said.