Overview of Achievements, 2018-2019

The IOLA Fund’s essential two-year grant of $190,000 has enabled LIFT to provide legal advice and information to unrepresented litigants in the New York City Family Courts. Our services are critical in Family Court where families often have no idea of their legal rights or remedies. Without LIFT, these litigants may encounter delays in their cases that could last for months, prolonging the families’ emotional turmoil and eroding the health and well-being of children as the families wind their way through issues like custody, visitation rights, child support, and protection in domestic violence cases.

Over the past year, LIFT served more than 25,000 Court-involved families through programs that provide an otherwise unavailable source of support. Our partnerships with the Family Courts, public officials, and a growing network of community-based organizations enabled LIFT to strengthen core programs, deepen services, and advance organizational priorities. All of LIFT’s services are available in Spanish.

LIFT’s Education & Information Sites, located inside New York City’s five Family Courthouses, provide quick answers to urgent legal questions. We served 8,141 people at the Sites. We also distributed 61,438 copies of LIFT’s original, multilingual Legal Resource Guides (LRGs). LIFT has created more than 40 LRGs.

Our Family Law Information Helpline — accessible by telephone, email and live-chat — served 14,908 individuals.

For litigants needing more intensive services, LIFT’s staff attorneys provided 926 clients with Court Consultations in all five boroughs. Clients met privately with a staff attorney and received legal advice and in-depth support in preparing a case.

LIFT piloted Family Legal Connection (FLC), our new, interactive, online platform for the provision of legal advice. We are increasing the number of families that benefit from the family law expertise of volunteer attorneys, who have been trained by LIFT.

We also expanded our community-based legal education program Citywide. LIFT served more than 400 participants with workshops and legal clinics.

Population Served: General Low Income Population

Area Served: New York City Metropolitan Area

Total Funding: $2,355,104

Total IOLA Grant: $95,000

Staffing - Full Time Equivalents:

- Total Staff: 16.27
- Lawyers: 9.07
- Others: 7.20
Example 1; Family Law: Carrie lives in Saratoga County with her 10-month-old daughter. Carrie and the child’s father have been separated since the child’s birth, and instead of seeking Court orders for custody or visitation, they informally agreed that Carrie would take custody and the father would have regular visitation with their daughter. However, more recently, Carrie observed that drug addiction had become a very serious problem for the child’s father, and she worried that he may even overdose. At the same time, the father was attempting to conduct visitation with his daughter while under the influence. Seeking legal advice but unable to afford to hire counsel, Carrie was referred to Family Legal Connection, and LIFT’s Pro Bono Programs Manager arranged for Carrie’s appointment on the FLC platform with a pro bono attorney. During their FLC consultation, the attorney advised Carrie on developing effective legal arguments to support her petition in Family Court for obtaining full custody of her daughter. The attorney also advised Carrie on how to obtain a court order to limit the father to supervised visitation as long as he demonstrates progress in overcoming his drug addiction.

Example 2; Family Law: Ray was paying child support in his capacity as a non-custodial father. Following the unexpected death of the child’s mother, Ray took informal custody, but the child’s maternal grandparents challenged Ray’s petition for sole custody in Family Court. At the same time, Ray was unable to secure a termination of the child support order while the custody case was pending, so arrears for unpaid child support accumulated substantially. After the Family Court granted him sole custody, Ray successfully petitioned the Court to terminate the child support order, but the arrears remained and he owed about $30,000 to New York City’s Department of Social Services. Given that he was proceeding without counsel, he came to LIFT inside the Queens Family Courthouse and asked for advice on addressing the arrears problem. LIFT’s Staff Attorney advised him to file the proper petition with appropriate documentation, which would enable him to demonstrate that he had custody of his child while the arrears accumulated. Ray expressed doubt that the Family Court would provide relief in his case, but our Staff Attorney urged him on, and he filed the petition as advised. In the end, the Court ordered the arrears to be forgiven entirely, and Ray expressed gratitude for our Staff Attorney’s advice and encouragement.
Other Services...

**Number of People Benefitted by Services Other Than Direct Legal Representation**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Service</th>
<th>Number</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>262,772</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Community Legal Education</td>
<td>3,548</td>
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<tr>
<td>Pro Se Assistance</td>
<td>81,391</td>
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<tr>
<td>Online Assistance</td>
<td>177,833</td>
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**Other Legal Related Services: Overview**

In addition to our Family Law Information Helplines (described in detail above in the “Remote Service Delivery” section), LIFT’s services include the following:

**Education & Information (EI) Sites:** Located inside the Brooklyn, Bronx, Manhattan, Queens and Staten Island Family Courthouses, the EI Sites provide on-the-spot legal information about family law, as well as assistance navigating the courthouse, starting court cases, and accessing court resources. The Sites are notable for their accessibility and ease of use. EI Sites operate as if performing triage—instant, helpful and anonymous—in order to set participants on a path toward our deeper services (should they meet the criteria for a consultation) or to empower them with the basic tools they need to take the next steps in their legal matter. The Sites served 8,141 people during the reporting period.

**Legal Resource Guides (LRGs):** LIFT’s 40 original, multilingual LRGs are available at all programs and on our website. They cover a wide range of family law issues, and provide Courthouse maps. LRGs are available in eight languages: English, Spanish, Chinese, Russian, Korean, French, Haitian/Creole, and Hebrew. LIFT distributed 61,438 copies of the LRGs at our Court-based programs, while over 60,000 visitors to our website accessed the digital LRGs, which may be downloaded. In 2018, the Family Court administration requested that LIFT prepare new LRGs to explain recent changes in court procedures pertaining to child support modifications and violations. Many litigants were confused by these changes, and the two new LRGs help alleviate the confusion. Additionally, LIFT has been approached by the Courts, New York City Council, and other constituencies to develop new LRGs for specific topics and populations. We recently completed the LRG focusing on the rights and needs of LGBTQ litigants in Family Court. We are also developing county- and region-specific LRGs for Family Courts litigants in New York State.

**Family Law Education and Community Outreach:** Through LIFT’s extensive network of public and nonprofit partners, this initiative includes community-based legal education workshops and legal clinics in New York City’s five boroughs. Each session serves an average of 7-10 parents (or those in parenting roles). A total of 443 people participated during the reporting period. With the program, LIFT brings our family law expertise to some of the City’s most vulnerable populations. We recently began specifically increasing services for four key constituencies: 1) veterans and active military service-members; 2) immigrants; 3) formerly incarcerated people; and 4) survivors of domestic violence and abuse. LIFT is focusing on these constituencies because our experience in providing them with family law services has revealed urgent needs for more targeted and specialized outreach, support and guidance.
**Other Legal Related Services: Examples**

**Example 1: Custody Case and the Education & Information (EI) Site:** Melanie, a single grandmother seeking custody of her grandson after her only daughter’s sudden death, found LIFT’s EI Site inside the Family Courthouse in Manhattan. The LIFT Staff Attorney provided her with legal information and Legal Resource Guides, and then scheduled a consultation with her in order to provide legal advice. Melanie received in-depth support and guidance from the Staff Attorney, and—as a pro se litigant—was awarded custody by the Family Court.

**Example 2: Family Law Education and Community Outreach:** LIFT piloted several workshops that confirmed the acute need for this project. For our first-ever all-Spanish-language workshop, we partnered with the Office of NYC Councilmember Carlos Menchaca to respond proactively to a recently enacted law in New York that allows immigrant parents to designate a standby guardian in cases of separation, detention or deportation. We helped immigrant parents understand various options for family preparedness, including custody, standby guardianship, and foster care. LIFT also partnered with HELP USA to conduct a workshop at a shelter for survivors of domestic violence, and with the Fortune Society on a legal clinic and workshop for formerly incarcerated fathers. In addition, LIFT’s two nearly completed Legal Resource Guides focus on active duty military service-members and veterans, and address their most frequent family law issues in New York State. LIFT is forging new partnerships with veteran-serving organizations to distribute these Guides and develop legal clinics when the Guides are released.

**Trainings**

Training and development are enthusiastically embraced by LIFT’s Board. We begin by providing a comprehensive orientation for new Board members. The orientation session entails in-depth discussions of LIFT’s history and programs. It also helps them build the knowledge and skills they need to serve successfully. For example, training on the development process helps members understand the aspects of fundraising in which they play a key role. Most new Board members also benefit from instruction on understanding a nonprofit organization’s finances and how to read and interpret financial statements. In addition, orientation and training highlights the fact that LIFT’s diversity at the Board and staff levels is essential to our cultural competence and ability to provide exceptional and responsive services to Family Court litigants. The Board also schedules occasional retreats that entail specialized training with the assistance of an outside facilitator. Recent retreats have helped Board members build additional knowledge and skills in order to advance organizational priorities, such as strategic planning and fundraising.

All employees, interns and volunteers, including attorneys, undergo extensive and ongoing training at LIFT to ensure that we are providing the best information and advice to our litigants. This includes a substantive family law training curriculum. Training at the start of employment with LIFT also includes courtroom observations and shadowing experienced employees. Since LIFT added legal advice to our service portfolio last year, we have trained staff attorneys on the ethical issues/rules of professional conduct governing an attorney-client relationship and the practical applications of those issues. We cover: competence, scope of representation, privilege and confidentiality, and conflicts of interest. We train attorneys on how to use our engagement letter and how to explain the document and limited scope representation to clients in a way that is clear to them. All program staff are required to attend in-person, LIFT-organized trainings eight times per year. Cultural competence elements are included in nearly all LIFT trainings.
Technology

LIFT used technology to advance our mission of enhancing access to justice for children and families. With Family Legal Connection, currently in its pilot phase, LIFT is pioneering the use of technology that enables Family Court litigants across the State to receive our services without having to travel to Court. In addition to bringing clients and pro bono attorneys together for consultations, FLC provides litigants with direct access to LIFT’s 40 original, multilingual Legal Resource Guides. FLC also addresses the needs of attorneys seeking pro bono opportunities, who welcome the convenience of the FLC technology, and nonprofit providers looking to connect clients with sources of legal expertise.

During the reporting period, LIFT paused the FLC pilot phase in order for Pro Bono Net, our technology partner, to rebuild the videoconferencing component of the platform and enhance its reliability. The rebuilding project was successful. Recently, we resumed the pilot phase and are pleased with the performance of the platform.

In addition, FLC significantly and specifically improves client access by:

- Reducing the need for trips to the Courthouse, which can entail transportation hardships and traveling long distances;
- Reducing delays in accessing legal services;
- Eliminating barriers to service for clients who are homebound or physically challenged; and
- Reducing the need for taking time away from work, securing childcare services, and other potentially expensive burdens.
Significant Collaborations

LIFT’s partnerships are a key organizational strength. We maintain a direct and high-functioning partnership with the Family Court administration. LIFT boosts efficiency by ensuring that the Court staff and Judiciary are aware of our services so that self-represented litigants may access those services with ease. Our partnership with the Family Court includes LIFT’s “Judge for a Day” Program, an important education and outreach initiative for multiple audiences.

We have also developed partnerships with a strong network of community-based service providers, to which we refer our participants for a wide range of legal and social services. The services participants obtain from our partners are vital to empowering Family Court litigants to achieve better outcomes for their families, and mitigate the need to return to Family Court to resolve additional crises. During the reporting period, LIFT’s staff and volunteers provided our participants with over 8,000 referrals. The legal services providers to which LIFT frequently refers participants include the City Bar Justice Center, Advocates for Children, Housing Court Answers, JASA, and Her Justice. In addition, we refer participants to Safe Horizon and local Family Justice Centers to obtain support on domestic violence matters.

Over the course of developing and implementing the Family Legal Connection pilot, LIFT has forged several productive partnerships that are essential to the success of the program. We will build on this success in order to expand FLC’s reach and serve pro se litigants across the State. Our FLC technology partner is Pro Bono Net, which we selected for this project based on their experience in building a platform that allowed for video conferencing and confidential document sharing. Pro Bono Net adapted the platform for LIFT’s Family Court needs. In addition, we partnered with two nonprofit legal services providers—The Legal Project of the Capital District Women’s Bar Association, located in Albany, and Nassau Suffolk Law Services—for the FLC pilot.

Over the past year, LIFT’s collaborations have enabled us to begin the long-term expansion of our Family Law Education and Community Outreach program. Our plan is to scale up the project through growth in partnerships and demand for our family law clinics. LIFT’s partner organizations for the initiative include HELP USA, Fortune Society, Children’s Aid, the Department of Veterans Services, and the Queens Family Justice Center. This growth will build on our successful ongoing partnerships for community legal education. LIFT’s network includes Legal Hand Jamaica (Queens); Hostos Community College in the Bronx; the Women’s Reentry Program at the Osborne Association; Brooklyn Community Recovery Center of Phoenix House; and many others. LIFT also works closely with the Brooklyn Borough President’s Office on several initiatives, including a free legal services clinic at Brooklyn Borough Hall.
Pro Bono Volunteer Involvement

LIFT’s Family Legal Connection enables pro bono lawyers to provide clients with meaningful assistance from their own offices, and broaden their impact by reaching litigants in distant locations. To date, JP Morgan Chase and the law firm of Proskauer Rose LLP are the first two collaborators for our FLC pilot. A team of 14 lawyers from both entities volunteered to provide pro bono legal services. Since the pilot launched in April 2018, the FLC has served over 50 clients. The attorneys have consistently indicated that providing the service has been a very positive experience, and they plan to continue. With this strong feedback, LIFT is well-positioned to engage additional firms that are seeking pro bono opportunities for their attorneys.

LIFT’s program team includes volunteers and law school student interns. At our EI Sites, they answer participants’ questions and address their concerns regarding Court procedure and family law matters, provide assistance in filling out forms, and distribute our Legal Resource Guides. During the reporting period, LIFT engaged a total of seven law student interns who provided a cumulative total of over 1,300 hours of service. They were assigned to a variety of substantive projects, and provided service to individuals through our Helplines.

During the reporting period, a retired attorney volunteered one day per week at our programs inside Manhattan Family Court. She provided both legal information services at the EI Site as well as legal advice through our Court Consultations. As such, LIFT was able to increase the number of people served, and to provide consultations concurrently with EI Site services. In addition, a new volunteer attorney joined us in the fall of 2018 at our Brooklyn Family Court location and, since then, has been providing a half-day of service each week. Our goal, going forward, is to continue replicating the success of this volunteer-enhanced service inside New York City’s Family Courthouses.

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Sources Of Funding

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