



LIFT – promoting access to justice for children & families
LEGAL INFORMATION FOR FAMILIES TODAY
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**LIFT RESPONDS TO THE NEEDS OF NEW YORK’S FAMILIES AND CHILDREN
BY OPERATING FAMILY COURT-BASED EDUCATION & INFORMATION SITES, A HOTLINE, AND
CONDUCTING COMMUNITY-BASED WORKSHOPS**

LIFT Gives a Monolingual Spanish-Speaking Mother of Three the Information She Needs to Secure Full-Custody of Her Children

One morning in Queens Family Court a mother approached the LIFT Education & Information Site (EI Site) looking relieved to see our Site Coordinator Rose Marie Garcia. The mother, who we will call Veronica, asked Ms. Garcia if she spoke Spanish, Ms. Garcia told her she did. Veronica said, “Thank god.”

Veronica explained that she was in Family Court with the hope of securing full custody of her children because her abusive husband had called her repeatedly during the night before, threatening to kidnap the children – all of who were less than three years old. Ms. Garcia explained the process of filing for child custody in Family Court, ensured that Veronica had a protection order along with a safety plan, and then directed her to the Family Court petition room.

Half an hour later, just as Ms. Garcia was closing the LIFT Site for the day at 1:00 p.m. Veronica returned, clearly distraught. Holding a petition for child custody in shaking hands, Veronica told Ms. Garcia that she could not complete the petition because it was English, and she could not read English. She recounted for Ms. Garcia an all too familiar story at LIFT – Veronica had asked for the form in Spanish, the petition clerks told her it was not “available” in Spanish, and that petitioners only had access to interpreters in the courtroom, not in the petition rooms. They instructed her to “bring a friend who could read English with her the next time she came to Court.” Veronica could not believe her ears.

With no other options, and no one else in the Courthouse who could help Veronica, Ms. Garcia kept the Site open and helped her complete the petition by translating the document as they went through it line-by-line. The completed petition in her hands, Veronica once again made her way to the petition room, and successfully began the process of securing the full custody of her children and the safety of her family.

The LIFT Hotline is the Only Option for a Homebound Grandmother who Wants to Understand Her Rights in Family Court

A grandmother we will call Lorna is sure that she must have a right to her grandchildren as they teeter on the brink of the vast child welfare system when her daughter gets caught up in the criminal justice system. She has heard from friends that she can go to Family Court, but has many questions before she goes. She learns about LIFT’s Hotline from a friend, and calls to ask:

- My grandchildren lived in Brooklyn with my daughter before she was arrested, are now in Queens with my other daughter, but I live in the Bronx, which Courthouse do I go to?
- What documents will I need to bring to Court on the day I go?

- If I do get custody of my grandchildren who were on my daughter's public assistance budget, will it impact my Social Security benefits?
- I have a hard time getting around and can't take public transportation; do you know how I can get help getting to the Courthouse?
- If I do get custody of the grandchildren, a lot is going to change in my life, can you tell me of any places in my neighborhood where I can get some support?

LIFT staff worked with Lorna to sort out the answers to all of her questions one by one. Taking the time Lorna needs to understand the ramifications of custody, should it be granted. Staff also works with Lorna to discuss transportation alternatives that can assist her get to the Court, and provide her with the telephone numbers of resources in her Bronx neighborhood where she can receive support as she begins the process of securing custody of her grandchildren, and becomes a parent again at sixty-seven. Before they hang up, Lorna rates the helpfulness of the call as a "perfect ten" because LIFT was the only organization that gave her the information she needed, and made her feel like a "strong lady ready to stand against whatever the wind blew her way."

A Single Mother Learns Her Rights Before Heading to Family Court Hoping to Secure Child Support for Her Four Month Old Son

In the spring of 2004, LIFT receives a call from a single mother's advocacy group asking us to conduct a series of workshops on a wide-range of topics in Family Court. At the workshops LIFT staff came to know a single mother from Brooklyn who we will call Marna. Marna had a home-birth, and is raising her four month old son alone. She is in desperate need of child support after relying on promises from her son's biological father that everything would be "fine" when the baby came. Things were far from fine for Marna. She had recently discovered that her son's father was married with three other children, and he was refusing to take her calls or help support the baby. Marna knew the father worked under the table, but had more than enough resources to help her support the child. The father's name was not on her son's birth certificate. The emotional turmoil she had been through had also taken its toll. Marna was exhausted, depleted and frightened. Other women in her advocacy group had described Family Court as a "maze" and she told us that she wanted to know everything she could before she even got to the door of the Court. The workshops LIFT conducted did just that. Marna learned the steps she needed to take to secure child support, including the fact that she would need to establish paternity first, and what documents she would need so that the Court could come up with a dollar amount for child support. LIFT also helped her understand what to expect and how to make her day in Family Court less stressful by outlining what to bring with her, and where she could find everything from the petition room to the waiting room.

This autumn we heard from Marna. She had gone to Family Court after all and had just learned that the Court had ruled that the father was, as she knew all along, the father of her son. She was now ready to move on to the next step in Court, securing the child support she needed. Marna told us she was "amazed" at how many women didn't even know they had to establish paternity before attempting to secure child support, and that she had sent countless women to the LIFT EI Site to learn how to proceed in Family Court. During the call she said, "Thanks to LIFT, I knew what I had to do, how long it was going to take, and I had the courage to do it. Even more important, I am clear about what to expect next. I don't know what I would have done without you."