



Lawyers For Children 2011 Annual Program Summary

Lawyers For Children provides critically needed, top quality legal representation and social work services for children in foster care in New York City. Every day, LFC staff can be found in the courtroom and in the community, advocating on behalf of children whose parents or guardians have voluntarily placed them into foster care, and children who are the subject of abuse, neglect, termination of parental rights, custody, visitation and adoption proceedings. Our mission is to help find a safe, permanent and loving home for each child we represent by providing them with the highest quality legal and social work services, as well as to advocate for the rights of children in foster care on a system-wide basis.

Lawyers For Children was founded in 1984 to address the lack of legal representation for children voluntarily placed in foster care, and represented 34 children in its first year. Since that time, Lawyers For Children has grown to become one of New York's premier child advocacy organizations, employing almost 60 staff members, and representing over 40,000 children. In 2011, LFC expects to represent approximately 4,000 children in over 6,000 proceedings. The vast majority of LFC's clients are children of color coming from poor and low-income households. LFC's extraordinary achievements over the past 27 years include multiple class action cases and legislative initiatives to improve the conditions for all young people in foster care in New York City; the design and implementation of special projects targeted to address the needs of critically underserved youth in foster care; creation, publication and distribution of a unique series of legal rights handbooks and resource guides, written

and designed for youth in foster care; and sustaining a best-practices advocacy model in which an attorney-social worker team is assigned to represent *every* LFC client. The experience and dedication of LFC attorneys and social workers has consistently resulted in permanency, safety and stability for our young clients, enabling them to leave the foster care system and return to their families or become part of new adoptive families.

Individual Advocacy – A Multi-Disciplinary Approach

Lawyers For Children’s primary mission is the direct representation of individual children whose parents or guardians have placed them into foster care, and those who are the subject of abuse, neglect, termination of parental rights, adoption, guardianship, paternity, custody and visitation proceedings.

At Lawyers For Children, a lawyer and social worker, both with extensive experience and training in child advocacy, work together on every case. Each LFC team is thus comprised of individuals with expertise in both the law and the full range of existing services available to our young clients. In addition, we engage child psychologists and psychiatrists on a case-by-case basis to provide enhanced expertise in child development and evaluation –information that is crucial to our attorneys' ability to provide the courts with credible and persuasive advocacy on behalf of our young clients.

The experience and dedication of LFC attorneys and social workers result in permanency, safety and stability for LFC’s young clients. Here is one example:

Sarina, Anthony and Marli Rivera* entered foster care after their mother abandoned them in a squalid, drug infested apartment. They were fortunate to be placed together in a loving foster home. This spring, after many years of planning, their foster mother, Ms. Gonzalez, moved to Florida to prepare a new home for the foster children she loved and planned to adopt. The children temporarily remained in New York with her adult daughter, Ms. Ortiz, so that they could finish the school term. Inexplicably, the agency reacted by scheduling a transfer of the children to a newly certified foster home in upstate New York. The children were devastated, especially the eldest, Sarina, who had always believed that she and her two siblings would live with Ms. Gonzalez forever. The children’s LFC attorney went to court immediately and secured an order permitting the children to stay with Ms. Ortiz, until they could move to Florida. At the end of the summer, their adoption by Ms. Gonzalez was finalized and Sarina, Anthony and Marli are finally secure in their new Florida home.

But, representing thousands of children each year is just the beginning. Despite the enormous demand for LFC's services to individual children, LFC maintains a commitment to continually explore new and innovative ways of protecting and advocating for children.

Adolescents Confronting Transition (ACT) Project

Funded by the Robin Hood Foundation, the *Adolescents Confronting Transition (ACT) Project* provides legal and social work services to a critically under-served population in foster care – adolescents in and aging out of foster care. This special project focuses on the desperate need of adolescents in foster care for legal and social work services to assist them in accessing the community based support they need to succeed as independent adults, by breaking the cycle of poverty, homelessness and violence in their families.

The ACT Project was conceived due to the dramatic increase in the percentage of LFC's clients in foster care who are adolescents and young adults; the recent statutory change expanding the Family Court's jurisdiction to include, for the first time, all young people between the ages of 18 - 21 whose parents or caretakers voluntarily placed them into foster care; and the lack of targeted services for this population as they make the crucial transition from foster care to independent adult lives.

The shortage of relevant and effective services for this population, and the system's failure to focus on and support meaningful connections to family and other caring adults, constitutes an unrecognized and profound crisis in foster care. These young adults, or "forgotten adolescents," who are transitioning out of care, are all too frequently warehoused in foster care without viable permanency planning, only to be discharged to discover that "independent living" means homelessness, shelters, public assistance or even incarceration.

This project allows LFC to direct advocacy and resources on behalf of adolescents aging out of foster care in order to achieve better education outcomes,

vocational and other job training, therapy and appropriate medical services, as well as helping to develop meaningful connections to caring adults who can support them through this time of transition and beyond. Providing sustained and intense advocacy for these young adults can make a dramatic positive difference in their lives, helping them re-enter the community as independent adults. The following case composites are examples of the advocacy LFC's professional staff provides on a daily basis on behalf of thousands of adolescents in foster care:

Jason, who suffers from severe developmental delays, was asked by his foster care agency to sign himself out of foster care on his 18th birthday. Jason had been in foster care for 11 years and has never lived without extensive supportive services. The plan was for the agency to put Jason on a bus and send him to Philadelphia to live with his mother. Unfortunately, Jason's mother has never cared for him, has refused to allow him to visit, and was not willing to accept Jason into her home. When LFC discovered what was to take place, we immediately met with Jason and found that he had absolutely no understanding of what was about to take place. As far as he knew, his mother was finally going to care for him. As soon as we received this information, Jason's LFC attorney went to family court and obtained an order requiring the agency to plan with Jason for the supportive transition to an adult residence that he wanted and deserved. LFC will continue to use the Family Court to insure that young adults like Jason are never discharged from foster care to a lonely life on the streets of an unknown city.

At age 17, Maria was being warehoused in a psychiatric hospital, while her foster care agency awaited approval to send her to live with her grandmother in North Carolina. The agency's paperwork, however, was lost in the bureaucratic maze of the New York State Child Welfare Administration. While Maria waited, she was brutally raped by three patients on her ward. The hospital staff blamed Maria and prepared to transfer her to a state hospital. Cutting through the red tape, LFC's social worker evaluated the grandmother's home and nearby support services and testified in court in support of our attorney's position for transfer of the child to her grandmother. The court directed that Maria be sent immediately to the safe haven of her grandmother's home. Maria is flourishing as a result of this successful family reunification.

Public Policy & Special Litigation Project

The Public Policy & Special Litigation Project continues to initiate, monitor and coordinate advocacy and educational strategies necessary to effectuate positive systemic reform on behalf of children in foster care in the five boroughs of New York City. These reform efforts include advocacy in family court proceedings, legislative

analysis and reform, individual appeals, impact litigation, and community, institutional, and judicial education, and are tied to LFC's direct services, reflecting the needs, wishes and rights of individual children in foster care.

The Public Policy & Special Litigation Project is also coordinated with LFC's other special projects (listed below), providing public policy and impact litigation expertise to LFC's efforts on behalf of children in foster care who identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual or transgender; whose immigration status is unresolved; who have been sexually abused; or have been exposed to domestic violence.

Project on Behalf of Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender and Questioning Youth in Foster Care

This project provides legal advocacy to LFC's many self-identifying LGBTQ clients. The project co-directors have also provided other advocacy organizations with consultations on individual cases, training, and general information. Consultations on behalf of individual clients have included advising on the strengths and weaknesses of current foster care facilities that are presented as "LGBTQ friendly," facilitating placements with LGBTQ foster parents, identifying appropriate services to address specific problems involving LGBTQ youth in foster care, and safety and bias issues. For example, the project directors have consulted with the Administration for Children's Services, the Juvenile Rights Program of the Legal Aid Society, LAMBDA Legal Services, the Council on Adoptable Children, the Peter Cicchino Youth Project at the Urban Justice Center, and private foster care agencies, including Hawthorne Cedar Knolls, Green Chimneys, and St. Christopher-Ottile.

The demand for LFC's LGBTQ Rights Handbook and Resource Guide, "You Are Not Alone," has been so great, that we have quickly distributed all 5,000 copies originally printed in English, and recently completed publishing an updated version of the handbook. Copies of the Handbook have already been provided to the Administration for Children's Services for use at its Satterwhite Academy, as part of their curriculum for training all new ACS caseworkers; numerous private foster care

agencies serving children from New York City; and, directly to many hundreds of LFC's clients in foster care.

The project directors also participate in the Administration for Children's Services LGBTQ Foster Parent and Foster Youth Action Groups, and two of the Action Group's subcommittees, one focusing on issues pertaining to transgender youth in foster care and the other on implementing ACS' newly formulated non-discrimination policy regarding children in foster care. They also participate in the *Ad Hoc* Trans Mental Health Task Force of the New York City Association of Homeless and Street-Involved Youth Service Providers, which includes representatives from ACS, the Urban Justice Center, the Empire State Coalition, the NYC Gay and Lesbian Anti-Violence Project, Green Chimneys, the Sylvia Rivera Law Project, the Callen-Lourde Health Center, the Ali Forney Center, Hetrick-Martin, FIERCE!, Montefiore Medical Center, and the Ryan-Nena Health Center.

Child Sexual Abuse Evaluation and Education Project

Founded in 1992, the Child Sexual Abuse Evaluation and Education Project's objective is to help children in foster care protect themselves from sexual abuse and re-victimization through a comprehensive program of education and advocacy. In addition to advocating on behalf of hundreds of children in foster care, over the past year the project continued to provide the treatment referrals and follow-up services necessary to promote our young clients' safety and recovery. We have also distributed thousands of copies of our handbook for young victims of sexual abuse, "You Are Not Alone," and have distributed our Treatment and Services Resource Directory to approximately 100 Family Court judges.

Immigration Rights Project for Children in Foster Care

Young people in foster care face untold obstacles in their journey toward security and independence. For many hundreds of children in care these obstacles are exacerbated dramatically by the fact that they are undocumented aliens. These young

people could face deportation at any time to a country where they do not speak the language and are unfamiliar with the culture. A green card is critical for these children because many of them know this country as their only home and have no ties to their country of origin.

Lawyers For Children's Immigration Rights Project for Children in Foster Care uses a special provision in the Immigration and Naturalization Act, the Special Immigrant Juvenile Status (SIJS) Statute, that allows children who are in foster care due to abuse, neglect, or abandonment to obtain green cards. The project also includes an outreach component, designed to provide as many young people as possible in foster care with the information necessary to determine for themselves whether they might be eligible for the legalization of their immigration status under the Special Immigrant Juvenile Status Statute, and how to begin the process.

Project on Behalf of Children in Foster Care Exposed to Domestic Violence

LFC provides a dedicated attorney-social worker team to represent children in the Integrated Domestic Violence Court in New York County Supreme Court. This enables LFC to help children in the most complex custody and neglect/abuse cases where domestic violence compounds other questions of safety and security.

Special Publications for Children in Foster Care

In addition to "Your Rights in Foster Care," our legal rights hand book, LFC has created the "You Are Not Alone" series, which includes handbooks and resource guides for children in foster care who have been sexually abused, those who identify as gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender, youth aging out of foster care, and those who are undocumented immigrants.

www.lawyersforchildren.org

LFC's web site makes important information available and accessible to young people, and enhances the ability of our attorneys and social workers to communicate quickly and effectively with our clients and the network of people and institutions that can assist us in providing the highest level of legal advocacy and social work services to children in foster care.

Organization's Income & Expenses for Fiscal Year Ended March 31, 2010

Total Support & Revenue	\$ 6,410,550
Program Expenses	\$ 5,304,000
Management & General	\$ 760,875
<u>Fundraising</u>	<u>\$ 257,297</u>
Total Expenses	\$ 6,322,172
Fund Balance	\$ 836,417
Net Assets	
Unrestricted	\$ 1,039,622
<u> Temporarily Restricted</u>	<u>\$ 218,750</u>
	\$ 1,258,372

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