



**Lawyers For Children
2017 Annual Program Summary**

Missions Statement

PROTECTING RIGHTS. CHANGING LIVES.

When children are in crisis, Lawyers For Children is at their side to provide protection, support and hope. We offer free legal and social work advocacy to abused and neglected children, children in foster care, and children in high conflict custody cases— ensuring that every young person we represent finds the love, safety and true sense of family that they need.

Since 1984, the attorneys and social workers at Lawyers For Children have been transforming the hopes of children in foster care into reality by providing critically needed, top-quality legal representation and social work services. Every day, LFC staff can be found in the courtroom and in the community, advocating on behalf of children in New York City.

Lawyers For Children gives our clients the representation and resources they deserve— a voice in the decisions that affect them, guidance in evaluating their options and support for the next steps in their lives. By advocating, educating and empowering, we dramatically improve the lives of youth in foster care and compel comprehensive reform of the foster care system.

Programs & Services

Individual Advocacy - A Multi-Disciplinary Approach

At Lawyers For Children, a lawyer and social worker, both with extensive experience and training in child advocacy, work together on every case. In addition, LFC is the only children's law office in the country to employ two full-time Youth Advocates (young adults who have successfully aged out of foster care) to provide additional support for older clients. Each LFC team is thus comprised of individuals with expertise in both the law and the full range of existing services available to ensure a successful future for every one of our young clients.

Since 1984, we have represented almost 30,000 children in New York City court proceedings involving: voluntary foster care placement, abuse, neglect, termination of parental rights, adoption, guardianship, paternity, custody and visitation. We listen carefully to our clients, help them understand their options and vigorously protect their right to a safe, secure and supportive place to call home. For some clients, this means returning to live safely with their families. For others, it means speeding their adoption or, for many of our clients who are over 18, setting out on their own with the knowledge and support necessary to establish homes, obtain jobs and embark on successful careers of their own.

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:



When Twyla entered foster care she was placed directly into a psychiatric hospital. She had attempted suicide and had a recent history of untreated self-mutilation. Once she was stable, her mother, who also suffers from severe mental illness, felt that she was unable to take her home and placed Twyla in foster care. Twyla was living in a residential treatment center when her LFC social worker first met her. It was immediately clear to Twyla's LFC social worker that Twyla was not receiving the services she needed. Twyla was being bullied at the center and had begun cutting herself again. Her LFC attorney brought the case into court the next day for a placement hearing. The agency responsible for Twyla's care insisted that they could meet her needs but during the hearing LFC was able to prove that Twyla had not once seen a psychiatrist, psychologist or licensed social worker since she had arrived. Following the testimony of Twyla's LFC social worker, the agency agreed to settle the case. Twyla was immediately moved to another placement identified by LFC and her LFC social worker accompanied her there from court. Twyla is receiving treatment and she now feels both safe and happy. Twyla was overjoyed by the move and is eager to re-enroll in the extra credit summer school courses that will allow her to skip a grade in school next year and move ahead with her plans for college.

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. Lawyers For Children's special projects focus on the following:

Public Policy & Special Litigation

The Challenge: The New York state and local child welfare systems continue to fail children in foster care. Despite changes in administration, improved policies and a decrease in the overall number of children in care, the needs of young people in foster care are not being met effectively. Children often fail to receive timely mental health assessments and services; older adolescents are not being prepared adequately for employment; LGBTQ youth are not placed in affirming homes; young people are not being discharged to appropriate, stable housing. These are but some of the chronic, systemic failures that leave children in foster care vulnerable and afraid.

LFC's Response: LFC created a Public Policy and Special Litigation Project to initiate, monitor, and coordinate advocacy and educational strategies necessary to effectuate positive systemic reform on behalf of all children in foster care in the five boroughs of New York City and in New York State. The project includes: individual advocacy in family court proceedings; legislative analysis and reform; *amicus curie* filings; impact litigation in both the State and Federal Courts; community, institutional, and judicial education; and collaborative work with city and state agencies as well as other advocacy organizations.

These reform efforts are tied to LFC's direct services and reflect the needs, wishes and rights of individual children in foster care. The project also works seamlessly with LFC's other special projects, providing public policy and impact litigation expertise for LFC's reform efforts on behalf of children in foster care who identify as gay, lesbian, bisexual or transgender; whose immigration status is unresolved; who have been sexually abused or have been exposed to domestic violence; who struggle with mental health issues; who require educational advocacy; and who are preparing to age out of the foster care system.

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

This project was originally made possible by the generous support of the KPMG and Sidley & Austin Equal Justice Works Fellowship

The Challenge: Domestic violence (DV) is identified in almost one-fifth of cases reported every year to New York's Administration for Children's Services. Children are often unnecessarily removed from their homes or suffer a disruption of the parent/child relationship solely because one of their parents is a victim of domestic violence. These children face trauma first from experiencing or witnessing DV, then from being taken from their homes, and again from being placed in foster care while their cases are resolved.

LFC's Response: Lawyers For Children's Domestic Violence Project provides specialized and comprehensive legal and social work services to children who have been exposed to domestic violence. The mission of the DV Project is to prevent the trauma of removal when possible by enabling our clients to remain with their non-offending parent when that is appropriate, and ensuring that children maintain access to both parents where appropriate. The project is staffed by two attorneys—one Project Director, whose legal practice centers on the Integrated Domestic Violence Part in

Manhattan Supreme Court, and (beginning in the fall of 2014) one Domestic Violence Specialist, who will focus on Manhattan Family Court cases—as well as a team of Master’s-level social workers with expertise and training in the particular trauma associated with domestic violence.

The DV project team identifies domestic violence issues in a wide spectrum of cases (foster care, abuse, neglect, family offense, custody and visitation) and provides individual advocacy (either directly or through case consultation) to access appropriate services in a timely manner, prevent unnecessary placements into foster care, and to continue a meaningful parent/child relationship where appropriate.

LGBTQ Rights Project

The Challenge: Like all children in foster care, lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and questioning (LGBTQ) youth are affected by the elimination of services, overburdened Family Courts, and an often dysfunctional child welfare system. Unlike other children in foster care, however, LGBTQ youth must also contend with discrimination based on sexual and/or gender identity; lack of service providers who are sensitive to the particular needs of LGBTQ youth; questions about whether to “come out” or openly acknowledge sexual or gender identity while in foster care; and difficulty finding supportive LGBTQ youth and adults.

LFC’s Response: LFC’s LGBTQ Rights Project consists of two attorneys who collaborate with LFC’s highly skilled social workers on each of their cases. The objectives of the project are to: 1) assess the needs of gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender and questioning youth in foster care; 2) develop and implement advocacy plans both for individual young people and for system-wide improvements; and to 3) inform LGBTQ youth in foster care of their rights through workshops and distribution of our You Are Not Alone handbook for LGBTQ youth in foster care, which includes a resource guide of programs and services specifically for LGBTQ youth.

Education Advocacy Project

This project is partially funded by a generous grant from the New York Bar Foundation.

The Challenge: Many children and youth need extra support and services at some point during their time in school. Children in foster care, however, face a whole host of additional challenges at school, many of which stem from the trauma of being removed from their homes or a lack of educational continuity due to changing foster care placements. Children in foster care often switch schools multiple times and, as a result, they can fall through the cracks in the education system.

In addition, young people in foster care are more likely to need special education services but, because they must rely on their agencies to advocate for their needs, they often do not get these services in a timely manner. Many do not receive necessary evaluations for Individualized Education Programs (IEPs), and those who do often suffer from the improper implementation of these plans.

LFC’s Response: In 2008, Lawyers For Children launched the Education Advocacy Project in response to the deep and growing need for specialized advocacy for the educational needs of our clients. The project consists of a social worker and an attorney who work together to provide targeted services that combine their expertise in New

York City's complex and ever-changing education system and education law, with their background in foster care advocacy.

The Education Advocacy Project team fights for the educational rights of individual clients in Family Court and in school hearings; connects clients to educational resources and services in the community; and consults with LFC's entire professional staff to ensure they are equipped with the tools they need to advocate for all of our clients' educational successes.

**Advocacy for Youth Aging Out of Foster Care:
Adolescents Confronting Transition (ACT) Project**

This project is funded by generous grants from The Robin Hood and EPIC Foundations and was previously funded in part by the Pinkerton Foundation

The Challenge: Adolescents who are preparing to age out of the foster care system face countless obstacles to success. These young adults—or “forgotten adolescents”—are all too frequently warehoused in foster care without targeted services to help them make the crucial transition to independent adult lives. Without strong educational supports, vocational training, access to adult mentors and support, and proper permanency planning, they risk discharge to unstable living arrangements and an uncertain future of homelessness, economic instability or even incarceration.

The shortage of relevant and effective services for adolescents in foster care constitutes a profound crisis. There is a critical need for these vulnerable young adults to receive assistance in accessing the community-based support they need to succeed as independent adults and to break the cycle of poverty, homelessness and violence in their families.

LFC's Response: The ACT Project provides legal and social work services to young people aging out of foster care, directing specialized attention advocacy and resources to this critically under-served population. Through the ACT Project, our clients achieve better education outcomes, acquire vocational and other job training, receive therapy and appropriate medical services, and get help developing 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 successful, independent adults.

The ACT Project is comprised of two attorneys (one Project Director and one Housing Advocate); three Master's-level, state-certified social workers, one of whom is the project's Pregnant and Parenting Adolescents specialist; and two Youth Advocates (young adults who themselves were in foster care). The ACT Project works seamlessly with several of LFC's other special projects (which focus on education, mental health, and immigration) and collaborates with outside providers (such as the Legal Aid Society, The Door and Advocates for Children) to advocate on behalf of this group of underserved young adults in foster care, whose unique needs call for representation and advocacy tailored to their complex life circumstances.

Additional ACT Project initiatives include: LFC's Youth Advisory Board (which holds monthly meetings for 20-30 current and former foster care youth); the Young Leaders Program (a research-based initiative designed to meet specific educational

and social support needs of our clients who are 18 and older); LFC's Threads to Impress Closet (clothing appropriate for job and school interviews and events); LFC's Support Group for Young Mothers & Fathers and Pregnant Youth in Foster Care; and LFC's Baby Boutique and Young Mother's Closet (maternity and infant books and clothing).

Mental Health Project

The Challenge: Young people in foster care have often experienced years of neglect and abuse, exposure to a host of environmental stressors and risk factors, the traumatic experience of entering foster care, and the continuing trauma of changing foster care placements. All of these factors and many more contribute to a higher rate of mental health diagnoses among youth in foster care than among their counterparts who are not in care.

It is estimated that 60% of children in foster care in New York City suffer from mental health issues. Left unaddressed, our clients' mental health challenges and those of their families can result in their extended involvement in the child welfare system and dramatically increase their chances of continued mental health struggles after leaving care.

LFC's Response: The goal of the Mental Health Advocacy Project, founded in 2007, is to ensure that our clients who have mental health challenges receive timely and comprehensive evaluations by trained professionals; high-quality, individualized services in the least restrictive placements possible; appropriate school-based services; and appropriately prescribed and monitored psychotropic medication when necessary. The project is staffed by a state-certified masters level social worker with expertise in mental health issues and advocacy who works closely with LF's professional staff, to ensure the best outcomes for every child and young adult we serve.

Child Sexual Abuse Evaluation & Education Project

This project was previously funded in part by generous grants from Equal Justice Works and The Morrison & Foerster Foundation

The Challenge: While the number of sexually abused children in the general population is concerning, the number of children in foster care who are the victims of sexual abuse is truly alarming. Some children were abused prior to entering foster care, while others suffer sexual abuse while in a foster care placement. Sexual abuse can have a particularly damaging effect on a child's ability to learn, grow and develop healthy relationships, all of which can have devastating consequences for that child later in life.

Once in foster care, sexually abused children are particularly vulnerable to repeated incidents of abuse. Many factors within the foster care system contribute to their increased risk, such as multiple transfers, rapid staff turnover, disruption of school and community safety nets, and lack of appropriate treatment and clinical services. To compound matters, many attorneys, child protective specialists, agency workers and foster parents do not have the information, skills or training necessary to respond to the needs of sexually abused children.

LFC's Response: Lawyers For Children's Child Sexual Abuse Evaluation and Education Project provides sexually abused children in foster care with expert, interdisciplinary representation that specifically addresses their particular needs. Our clients are

interviewed with skill and sensitivity by an attorney and social worker who are both specially trained in child sexual abuse issues.

We approach our clients with an understanding of their developmental needs, the avoidance of leading and suggestive questioning, the normalization of the emotions and symptoms common to the experience of sexual abuse, and the ability to sensitively explore and evaluate complex issues.

We develop trusting relationships with each child, providing a safe space where their experiences of trauma and its ongoing effects are validated, thus empowering and giving our clients voice throughout the legal process. Our specialized knowledge informs each step of our case strategy and development, from examining evidence to preparing our clients to testify in court.

The project offers trauma-informed education, guidance and information to the individuals and systems that impact our client's lives, including foster parents and family members, agency and child protective workers, and attorneys and judges. The project team maintains a list of existing resources for these clients and provides resource information to other stakeholders when appropriate.

Each year, our project attorney and social worker also consult with our own staff attorneys and social workers on behalf of hundreds of individual children who have been sexually abused.

By providing our clients with high quality services and compassionate representation, children who have experienced sexual abuse have the chance to become settled in safe, loving and permanent homes that will assist in their recoveries and help prevent future victimization.

Immigration

The Challenge: Immediately following the presidential election, Lawyers For Children experienced a severe uptick in calls from concerned clients about their immigration status. Young people in foster care face untold barriers in their journey toward security and independence. For many hundreds of children in care these barriers to success are exacerbated dramatically by the fact that they are without legal immigration status in the United States. The daunting reality is that a young person in foster care who is undocumented faces potential deportation at any time. For these children, being deported to a country where they are completely disconnected from any family or caring adults, may not speak the language and are unfamiliar with the culture is a terrifying prospect; Lawful Permanent Residency (a "green card") is critical for their safety and wellbeing.

LFC's Response: In order to properly respond and protect our clients, LFC brought in experts to update all LFC staff about how to inform and engage our clients about their rights, the specific documents they will need, and what to do if a client or parent is detained or placed in removal proceedings.

LFC also recently expanded its Immigration Rights Project, which now includes two attorneys *and* a master's-level social worker dedicated to the emerging needs of undocumented youth in foster care. The Immigration Rights Project utilizes the

Special Immigrant Juvenile Status (SIJS) Statute, a special provision in the Immigration and Naturalization Act, to obtain lawful permanent residence for eligible undocumented clients. Through SIJS, a child may apply for a green card if the Family Court makes special findings, including that the child cannot reunify with one or both parents due to abuse, neglect, or abandonment. SIJS may also be available to children who are not in foster care, including children who are the subject of guardianship, custody, and adoption proceedings.

The project also includes an outreach component, designed to provide young people in foster care with crucial information about SIJS, and how to begin the process. Because the laws affecting SIJS are frequently updated, LFC clients with immigration questions meet frequently with their LFC attorney and social worker to discuss their individual situation.

Enabling our clients to stay in the U.S. legally allows them to continue their education, become eligible for employment and embark on a promising future in the country that is their home.

Income & Expenses for Fiscal Year Ended March 31, 2017

Total Support & Revenue	\$8,381,429
Total Expenses	\$8,350,313
Program Services	\$ 7,907,464
Management & General	\$ 723,227
Fundraising	\$ 329,176
Net Assets – end of year	\$1,448,555

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