

Giving Grandparents a LIFT: Program Teaches Kinship Caregivers About the Family Court System

MELISSA M. BECK, Esq.

LIFT (Legal Information for Families Today), New York, New York, USA

At an age when some of their peers are finally able to relax, many grandparents are once again getting up for 4:00 a.m. feedings, cleaning up messy rooms, and arguing with rebellious teenagers. Grandparents as well as other relatives take on the responsibility of raising children for many reasons. It is never easy, but when the family court is involved, the situation can quickly become overwhelmingly complex.

Each day throughout New York City thousands of families line up at family court metal detectors and crowd its halls, often for hours, waiting for the court to hear cases that strike at the heart of today's most urgent issues such as domestic violence, custody, delinquency, and child abuse. Understaffed and suffering from a glaring lawyer shortage, the courts move at a snail-like pace. Meanwhile, with the majority of families neither able to afford nor legally entitled to receive legal representation, most carry the added burden of representing themselves. Even the few who do receive court-assigned lawyers often discover that huge caseloads leave their calls for help unanswered.

Without an understanding of their legal rights and responsibilities, without a roadmap and without a guide, families lose what little opportunity they have to secure a prompt and appropriate legal response to their problems. Moreover, the feelings of helplessness, alienation, and anger evoked by these systemic conditions compound the stressors that originally propelled many families into court, thus setting the stage for additional family crises and poor outcomes for children.

Launched in 1996, LIFT is the only organization in New York City providing legal information and support to families facing these significant challenges through the operation of five high-impact and rigorously

Address correspondence to Melissa M. Beck, Esq., Executive Director, LIFT, 350 Broadway, Suite 400, New York, NY 10013 USA. E-mail: mbeck@liftonline.org

evaluated programs: (a) family-court-based education and information sites where families can have their legal questions addressed, receive multilingual resources, and secure referrals to community-based services; (b) the Legal Information Hotline; (c) 26 original multilingual legal resource guides, including legal information activity books for children; (d) the Family Legal Center, where parents and grandparents involved in child support, custody, and visitation cases secure individualized legal information and support; and, the topic of this paper, (e) the Relatives as Parents Program (RAPP).

RAPP builds on the success of LIFT's Legal Education Program which, for the past decade, has provided people with more in-depth knowledge of family court in order to prepare them for the experience before they enter the system and, when needed, to suggest alternatives to court involvement. Through the program, we bring our expertise from the courthouses into communities throughout New York City. With support from the Brookdale Foundation Group, we launched RAPP in May 2007 in response to a sharp increase of requests for legal education workshops from groups working with grandparents.

As a first step, LIFT developed an original legal information curriculum for relative caregivers and produced a unique takeaway portfolio for workshop participants that includes LIFT's original legal resource guides on topics related to the subject of the workshop as well as written materials from other organizations and agencies. In the first year of operation, we conducted five workshops in collaboration with partner organizations that serve relatives as parents and their families. LIFT also convened an advisory committee for the program to identify additional needs relatives as parents are facing and to determine how we can partner to better address those needs.

At the workshops, LIFT presents legal topics such as child custody, guardianship, and the foster care system. Each topic is selected and tailored in consultation with host organizations to ensure that the presentation will address the needs of the relatives participating in the workshop. All workshops reach beyond the basics of family law and introduce information on accessing and understanding the public benefits to which relative caregivers are entitled, outline alternatives to formal legal action, and, ultimately, provide participants with the tools needed to make informed legal decisions for their families.

Each workshop is evaluated using a pre- and postsurvey that measures the effectiveness of the presentation and whether the goal of increased understanding of the topic presented was reached. Collected data is used to refine and improve the program on a regular basis as well as to communicate our success to the growing circle of supporters who help to ensure the sustainability of LIFT's RAPP. To date, results have been impressive: 90% of all participants dramatically increased their understanding of the legal topics presented, and respondents recount, "LIFT's workshop has excellent information on justice for family (sic) and children"; "Information very

educational, especially since I am a grandparent”; and “Very well-presented with examples and clarity, very informative and very helpful to me.”

As we move into our second year of the RAPP, we will continue to build on our successes and implement a peer-to-peer model: relative caregivers who have previously navigated family court will conduct workshops with the support and supervision of LIFT’s director of policy, education, and training. These peer trainers will build on our core curriculum by sharing their direct experiences in family court. All peer trainers will receive a stipend for participating in a train-the-trainer program, at which they will be trained on the necessary skills and legal topics that they need to conduct the workshop. They will also receive a stipend for each seminar they conduct. As we recruit and train a cohort of peer trainers to conduct the seminars, we will also increase our capacity to conduct workshops for grandparents.

Also during the coming year, LIFT will work to forge systemwide reform on behalf of the grandparents who benefit from the RAPP program by working to improve access to the courts for those with visual and hearing impairments, many of whom are the relative caregivers we are serving. RAPP’s first year was extremely successful; LIFT has exciting plans for future innovation and for facilitating meaningful reform on behalf of all of the relative caregivers RAPP serves.

For more information about LIFT’s RAPP, please contact Melissa M. Beck, Executive Director, LIFT at mbeck@liftonline.org. To contact LIFT’s free Legal Information Hotline, please call (212) 343-1122, Monday–Friday, 9:00 a.m. to 5:00 p.m. To learn more about LIFT’s programs, or to download one of LIFT’s 26 legal resource guides—including *The Rights of Relatives in Family Court*—please visit our Web site, <http://www.liftonline.org>.