

S N A P S H O T

Using Data in Domestic Violence Work



Spotlight on Legal Information for Families Today (LIFT) in New York City's Family Court System

Navigating family court can be overwhelming, confusing, and stressful for families. Many people have financial barriers to accessing counsel, cannot qualify for traditional civil legal services, and are self-represented in their legal matters. The stress and risks involved in court appearances are amplified for survivors of violence. As part of an effort to build evidence for promising solutions, the Resource Center on Domestic Violence: Child Protection and Custody (RCDV: CPC) worked with Legal Information for Families Today (LIFT) to design and implement a client feedback process. This snapshot highlights LIFT's experience augmenting their existing data to incorporate client voices systematically and measure the impact of their legal consultation services for self-represented families.

Data and evaluation-related needs. LIFT is a non-profit that provides a range of legal information and advice services across New York State. Along with its legal helpline, LIFT has in-person offices open to litigants in each of New York City's five family court locations. Since many survivors do not share their experiences with the court, addressing the dynamics of domestic violence presents an important challenge for LIFT. LIFT provides court consultations to self-represented litigants aimed at providing them with the tools they need for effective self-representation, including legal advice and information, procedural information for navigating the courthouse, assistance in completing paperwork, and trial advocacy support (e.g., mock trial exercises). LIFT also provides ongoing support and referrals to legal and other services as necessary.

The LIFT program uses a Salesforce data platform for its administrative data system. Its

data system contains a great amount of factual information concerning the type of cases its clients are involved in, the phase of the proceedings, and family relationships that are pertinent to understanding the case. Depending on the case, a consultation could last anywhere from 15 to 90 minutes. Prior to the enhancement project, the data was used for a yearly review of resource allocation to identify how clients heard about LIFT (e.g., signage in court, website), and to spot referral trends and make adjustments to reach and serve clients better. LIFT also analyzed trends by geography (zip codes) to understand the regions of the city its clients came from. Although LIFT had considerable strength in its data system, as well as staff with the ability to utilize it, LIFT did not have a systematic process for gathering client feedback that measured the impact of its legal consultations. Unlike more traditional legal services that benefit from seeing the cases to conclusion, LIFT's limited scope service model provides advice to 1,000 litigants per year but often for only one or two sessions. LIFT's challenge was to assess how effective its services are for its clients.

The process. RCDV: CPC research staff worked with LIFT's chief executive officer, chief program officer, legal director, and director of legal technology to discuss ideas. The group eventually settled on a survey administered during the client intake and one administered after their legal consultation. The goal of the survey was to measure client feelings after a legal consultation, both about the consultation itself and how it impacted their perception of their court experience. To be sustainable the survey had to be brief enough to complete without placing undue burdens on clients, but still cover the items that LIFT was

most interested in knowing. The team agreed on measuring how well LIFT is able to assist clients in preparing court documents, whether clients felt they left with additional knowledge, and whether clients felt they were ready to handle their cases as a self-represented litigant. During a series of phone consultations, RCDV: CPC staff worked with the LIFT team to develop a prototype instrument that could be administered on paper and integrated with the client intake process. A Bronx Family Court staff attorney piloted the initial survey with careful consideration of how the instrument was administered and the procedures for protecting responses and entering them into the LIFT data system for analysis. The pilot helped to identify questions that clients did not understand and refine the survey. For example, the length of the survey was reduced, some questions were clarified, and all language was measured for ease of understanding. A subsequent test indicated that the refined survey worked well, and it was consequently adopted by Kings County (Brooklyn) Family Court and Queens County Family Court sites.

Findings and lessons learned. Survey data collected on an ongoing basis indicate where clients have the greatest service need, and that much of the time their concerns are addressed through the service.

- 95% of clients agree or strongly agree that they need help understanding their options. **About 1 in 5 clients still feel unsure they understand their options after the consultation.**

- 48% of LIFT clients have safety concerns they need help addressing. **About 1 in 6 clients feel they require additional assistance addressing safety options after the consultation.**
- 66% need help completing their paperwork. **About 1 in 5 clients still feel they need help after the consultation.**
- 85% need coaching on how to interact with the judge and court staff. **The need was reduced to about 1 in 5 after the consultation.**
- 75% need coaching on how to communicate well with other parties in their case. **About 1 in 4 clients still felt this way after the consultation.**
- 95% require help understanding their next steps. **About 1 in 5 clients still felt this way after the consultation.**
- 95% of LIFT clients were happy or very happy with the service they received. **All clients had an opportunity to provide open-ended comments concerning their experience.**

Initial findings are helping LIFT to document its impact and demonstrate how the process can be expanded and sustained across all family courts throughout New York City. The results help to support the need for LIFT and the impact their model can have, but also document that some clients need further help and where such help is needed.



RCDV:CPC
Resource Center on Domestic Violence:
Child Protection and Custody

A project of the National Council of Juvenile and Family Court Judges



ABOUT THE RESOURCE CENTER

The National Council of Juvenile and Family Court Judges houses The National Resource Center on Domestic Violence: Child Protection and Custody. The Resource Center is devoted to helping domestic violence survivors and professionals such as judges, attorneys, social workers, and domestic violence advocates who work with survivors in the child protection and custody systems. In addition to providing training and technical assistance, the Resource Center also conducts research and evaluation projects focused on the intersection of domestic violence and child protection or child custody. Contact us by telephone at (800) 527-3223 or by email at fvinfo@ncjfcj.org.