

ASSOCIATION OF THE BAR OF THE CITY OF NEW YORK

COMMITTEE ON FAMILY COURT AND FAMILY LAW

REPORT ON FAMILY COURT SERVICES

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APRIL 2006

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The Committee on Family Court and Family Law of the Association of the Bar of the City of New York extends its sincere thanks to all of the service organizations that participated in our family court services survey. These responses formed, in large measure, the basis for this report. We also are most grateful for the contributions of the New York University School of Law Family Defense Clinic students, Zabrina Aleguire, Jade Burns, Gabe Freiman, Adam Heintz, Amanda Lockshin and their professor, Christine Gottlieb, for their thoughtful observations on the family court process. In addition, we wish to individually thank the following for their editorial comments and assistance: Honorable Joseph M. Lauria, Administrative Judge, New York City Family Court; Honorable Guy P. DePhillips, Supervising Judge, Queens County Family Court; Honorable Susan Knipps, Supervising Judge, New York County Family Court; Honorable Jane Pearl, Supervising Judge, Kings County and Richmond County Family Courts; Honorable Clark V. Richardson, Supervising Judge, Bronx County Family Court; and Carol Goldmaker, Assistant to Theresa M. Gillis, Jones Day Reavis & Pogue.

INTRODUCTION

Family law cases are ever more complex, owing to the fact that litigants, in addition to their legal problems, frequently face numerous non-legal problems such as poverty, substance abuse and mental health problems, as well.¹ Accordingly, court-connected services are now an integral part of most family courts around the nation as they enable the Court to address these underlying but equally important aspects of a family law case.² The advent of this new paradigm for family courts—a model that includes services for families—has created an interest in examining the breadth and depth of these services, as well as the challenges facing service providers. The Association of Family and Conciliation Courts (AFCC), for example, recently completed a nationwide survey of family court services and issued a report of its findings.³

In light of these developments, the Committee on Family Court and Family Law has conducted a survey of court-connected services available to users of New York City's Family Courts. Acknowledging the broad range of services available and the need to have these essential resources easily accessible to people who must navigate the courthouses, the Committee has attempted to catalogue all services provided in each of the City's five family court courthouses, which are located in the Bronx, Brooklyn, Manhattan, Queens and Staten Island. To the extent possible, we describe the services offered by each provider, the background of staff members including their professional experience and training, the source(s) of each organization's funding and the scope of its work.

The report is intended to provide current information about the types of services provided in the City's family courthouses and how to access the assistance they offer. Consequently, we hope this report will serve as a resource for judges, court personnel and family court practitioners

¹ See Barbara A. Babb and Judith D. Moran, *Substance Abuse, Families and Unified Family Courts: The Creation of a Caring Justice System*, 1 J. HEALTH CARE L. & POL'Y 19 (1999) (describing the non-legal issues that frequently characterize family law matters).

² ASSOCIATION OF FAMILY AND CONCILIATION COURTS, EXEMPLARY FAMILY COURT PROGRAMS AND PRACTICES, PROFILES OF INNOVATIVE AND ACCOUNTABLE COURT-CONNECTED PROGRAMS (2005) (demonstrating the scope of family court services available throughout the country).

³ *Supra*, note 2. See also Telephone Interview with Peter Salem, Executive Director, Association of Family and Conciliation Courts (March 28, 2005).

as to what is available for families in New York City's family courts. We also hope to demonstrate how these providers interface with one another, if at all, and whether the range and scope of services available is consistent among the county courthouses. Lastly, the report includes a participant/observer study undertaken by law students in the Family Defense Clinic at New York University School of Law, which chronicles the students' experiences during visits to each of the City's family court courthouses.⁴ This study can shed light on the family court experience from a litigant's perspective and contains the students' recommendations based upon their findings.

METHODOLOGY

For the purposes of this report, court-connected services are those services that are actually located within the courthouse, with the exception of the Richmond County Family Court. As a consequence of space constraints in the building housing this family court, there is not enough room for every service provider to have an office in the courthouse. Accordingly, agency staff members station themselves in the lobby or move from floor to floor in order to make their services known to litigants. In addition, the court officers in the Richmond County Family Court assist litigants to locate agency personnel. For these reasons, we consider the agencies as courthouse service providers and include them in this report.

The survey instrument used to gather the data for the study was developed by the Committee and is attached to this document.⁵ Surveys were conducted via telephone, email or in-person interviews with representatives of family court service providers. Members of the Committee conducted the surveys and in some instances wrote the narrative summaries based upon the interviews. In others, the narrative summary was the written product of the provider.

The Committee made every effort to contact each provider; however, some were ultimately unreachable and, thus, were not included among the services catalogued.

⁴ See Attachment B.

⁵ See Attachment A.

We used the borough-wide Family Court Resource Guide provided by Legal Information for Families Today (LIFT) to identify and contact each of the service providers. We also contacted the Clerks in each of the family courts to ensure that our list of service providers comprised all of the resources that exist in each courthouse.⁶ The method used to conduct the law students' participant/observer study is specifically described in the section of this report devoted to their work.

Once all of the surveys were completed, a committee member was assigned to each borough to conduct an in-person survey of the courthouse to ensure that we had not overlooked a potential survey participant. A draft copy of the program narrative section of the report was circulated to all participants for review and comment for accuracy. To the extent that we received additions and corrections, we amended the document accordingly.

The final draft of the report was circulated for comment to Honorable Joseph M. Lauria, Honorable Guy P. DePhillips, Honorable Susan Knipps, Honorable Jane Pearl and Honorable Clark V. Richardson in their respective capacities as Administrative Judge and Supervising Judges of the New York City Family Court. We very much appreciate their careful attention and thoughtful feedback. We incorporated some of the comments we received and we are encouraged that the Court has taken steps to begin implementing some of the report's recommendations. These efforts to date include: (1) reissuing a standing directive to redact case subject matter contained in posted court calendars, (2) removing "unofficial" paper signage cluttering courthouse walls, (3) planning for a mechanism to provide information to individuals regarding the court process while they are in security check lines, (4) reevaluating the utilization of space within courtrooms, (5) assessing the availability of child-friendly artwork to display on courthouse walls, (6) assessing the feasibility of making childcare centers available for use during the lunch hour and (6) reiterating expectations for courtroom decorum. While we understand that the New York City Family Court is constrained both by the nature of the cases

⁶ George Cafasso, Queens County Family Court; Evelyn Hassanoeddin, New York County Family Court; Paul Moriarity, Bronx County Family Court; Robert Ratanski, Kings County Family Court; and William Quirk, Richmond County Family Court.

brought to this unique forum and its occupancy in New York City owned and operated buildings, some of which present significant architectural challenges, we hope to continue to work with the court on further implementation of the recommendations contained herein.

What follows on the subsequent pages is a narrative summary of the services provided by the participating organizations.

BRONX COUNTY FAMILY COURT
900 Sheridan Avenue
Bronx, NY 10451

A. *Bronx Family Court Bar Association*

Contact Person: Richard Bondi, President

Contact Information: E-mail: rab18B@yahoo.com
 Telephone: (718) 590-6305

Mailing Address: 900 Sheridan Avenue, Box 13
 Bronx, NY 10451

Courthouse Location: Room 7-86

Staff Roster: Attorneys – 79

Source(s) of Funding: Member dues

Program Description

The Bronx Family Court Bar Association provides educational, legal and technical assistance to members. The Bar Association may be contacted by the general public either on a walk-in or phone-in basis. Legal advice is provided only with respect to clients of members of the organization. Referral services are available on a case-by-case basis to members of the general public.

The Bar Association collaborates with other government and private agency service providers located in the Bronx County Family Courthouse. It holds frequent conferences with work groups representing those agencies.

Staff Training

All attorneys have law degrees and are members of the bar. Attorneys also participate in continuing legal education programs.

B. *The Children's Law Center (CLC)*

Contact Person: Carol Sherman

Contact Information: E-mail: csherman@clcnny.org
 Telephone: (718) 522-3333, ext. 123

Mailing Address: 44 Court Street, 11th Floor
 Brooklyn, NY 11201

Courthouse Location: Room F-18

Staff Roster: Legal Staff – Deputy Director and 6 staff attorneys
 Social Work Staff – Social Work Supervisor, 1 social worker, 1

case worker
Administrative Staff – 4

Source(s) of Funding: New York State Office of Court Administration (100%)

Program Description

CLC provides legal representation of children in custody/visitation, domestic violence, guardianship, and related proceedings in the Bronx County Family Court and in the Integrated Domestic Violence Part of the Bronx Criminal Court. In 2004, CLC's Bronx office was assigned to approximately 1,900 cases.

Judges and Referees in the Bronx County Family Court and the Integrated Domestic Violence Part of the Bronx Criminal Court assign appropriate cases to CLC. Individuals cannot directly contact the organization for assistance. CLC attorneys meet with the parties in court when CLC is assigned and arrange for them to come to the CLC office with their child(ren) so that the child(ren) can be interviewed by the attorney.

CLC attorneys and social workers work with other agencies and private providers such as supervised visitation agencies, mental health facilities and providers, parenting programs and domestic violence agencies. In addition, CLC works with individual psychologists, psychiatrists and social workers who prepare forensic evaluations for the court.

Staff Training

All attorneys have law degrees and are members of the bar. Attorneys also are trained in substantive areas of law, interviewing skills, case and trial preparation and trial techniques. Attorneys and social workers are trained in child development, domestic violence, and other areas related to families and children. Attorneys and social workers attend outside conferences and continuing education programs.

C. *Courtroom Advocates Project (CAP)*

Courthouse Location: Petition Clerk's Office and Intake Part

Program Description and Contact Information

See Richmond County.

D. *Court Appointed Special Advocates (CASA)*

Courthouse Location: 6E26

Program Description and Contact Information

See New York County.

Source(s) of Funding: Health & Hospitals Corp. - NYC

Program Description

Mental Health Services provides neutral, court-ordered forensic evaluations of family court litigants, but it does not provide treatment. Mental Health Services collaborates with all court agencies and personnel involved with the individuals being evaluated.

Staff Training

All clinical personnel have degrees in psychology or social work.

H. NYC Department of Education/Court Liaison Project

Contact Person: Deborah Rice-Tarrant, Court Liaison
Catherine Sevos, Coordinator

Contact Information: E-mail: drice@nycboe.net
Telephone: (718) 681-5999 (D. Rice-Tarrant)
Telephone: (646) 996-9771 (C. Sevos)

Courthouse Location: 6B19

Staff Roster: Court Liaison-1
Coordinator-1

Source(s) of Funding: NYC Department of Education

Program Description

The Court Liaison Project operates under the auspices of Passages Academy. The Court Liaison provides academic and attendance information about court-involved youth in delinquency matters. Information is made available solely pursuant to court order, subpoena or parental consent. In addition to providing information, the Court Liaison can expedite school placement.

I. The New York City Family Court Child Permanency Mediation Program

Contact Person: Jorge Irizarry

Contact Information: Telephone: (718) 681-2195 or (718) 590-7346

Courthouse Location: Room 1 F 19

Program Description

See New York County.

J. The New York City Family Court Mediation Program

Contact Person: Francisco Negron, Mediation Manager, Bronx

Contact Information: Telephone: (718) 866-9995

Courthouse Location: 1 F 8

Program Description
See New York County.

K. *Safe Horizon Bronx Family Court Program*

Contact Person: Raquel Boga, Director

Contact Information: E-mail: rboga@safehorizon.org
Telephone: (718) 560-2371

Courthouse Locations: Room 6E-38 – Domestic Violence Unit (includes Night Court Services)
Room 6E-38 – Supervised Visitation
Room 7-90 – Children’s Center
7th Floor Waiting Area-Night Court Services

Staff Roster: Director - 1
Senior Case Manager – 2
Case Managers – 4
Client Advocate/Reception – 1
Supervised Visitation Social Worker – 1
Head Children’s Center Teacher – 2
Children’s Center Teacher – 1-2
Supervised Visitation Part-time Case Managers – 3

Source(s) of Funding: City and State grants

Program Description
See Kings County.

KINGS COUNTY (BROOKLYN) FAMILY COURT
330 Jay Street
Brooklyn, NY 11201

A. *Administration for Children's Services/Family Assessment Program*

Contact Person: Barbara Hill, Child Protective Manager and
Director of Field Operations

Contact Information: E-mail: Barbara.Hill@dfa.state.ny.us
Telephone: (718) 260-8781

Mailing Address: 345 Adams Street, 8th floor
Brooklyn, NY 11201

Courthouse Location: 11th Floor (Ask for room number at the reception desk)⁷

Staff Roster: Child Protective Manager-1
Level II Family Assessment Specialists-8
Level II Clerical Associate-1
Level III Clerical Associate-1

Source(s) of Funding: New York City

Program Description

The Family Assessment Program provides child evaluation assessments, family advocacy, and information and referral services. The goal of the program is to provide early intervention for families at risk to prevent intra-familial violence. The program began operating in February 2003 and has since that time served over 5,000 families.

Referrals to the program come from the New York City Police Department (NYPD) and the Department of Education (DOE); however, referrals also come from the community at large (community-based organizations, individuals and family members). These referrals arise in cases of truancy and domestic disputes. In order to promote community awareness of the program's voluntary services, program staff engages in community outreach activities. Court ordered participation is minimal.

Collaborative endeavors with other community-based agencies that are involved with the family, as well as Family Court-based services, are routine and ongoing. "Collaboration is a major component of the program to ensure the continuity of services, to avoid the duplication of services and to demonstrate ethical and cohesive social work practices."⁸

Staff Training

Training for the professional staff continues throughout the year and addresses such topics as engagement protocols, assessment skills, accessing community resources, program

⁷ As of the date of publication, the office's relocation to the new Kings County Family Court Courthouse is pending.

⁸ Telephone Interview with Barbara Hill, Child Protective Manager-Director of Field Operations, Kings County Family Court, New York, NY (July 15, 2005).

specific issues and policies that govern interagency collaboration with the DOE, the NYPD and the Department of Probation (DOP). The clerical staff participates in training to enhance clerical skills and to increase overall awareness of agency policies and procedures.

B. *The Children's Aid Society/PINS Diversion Program*

Contact Person: Kim Dorsey, Assistant Director, PINS Diversion
and Court-related Services

Contact Information: E-mail: kimd@childrensaidsociety.org
Telephone: (718) 625-8300

Mailing Address: 175 Remsen Street
Brooklyn, NY 11201

Courthouse Location: TBD⁹

Staff Roster: Social Workers-18
Accountability Staff-4 (manage reporting to ACS, DOP and Office
of Mental Health (OMH))
Psychiatrists-2 (part time)
Educational Specialists-2 (one specializes in vocational education)
Substance Abuse Specialist-1
Mentoring Coordinators-3

Source(s) of Funding: New York City/ACS
Private Donors/Foundations

Program Description

The PINS Diversion Program provides prevention and intervention services for at-risk youth. These services include: (1) 30-day psycho-social assessments for young persons pursuant to an order from the Family Court; (2) 30-day social work assessments pursuant to Administration for Children's Services (ACS) Family Assessment Program (FAP) referrals (prior to the intervention of the Family Court); and (3) follow-up referrals to the Children's Aid Society's long-term preventive program or other community-based preventive or mental health treatment programs. Families may only access services via the FAP or by order of the Family Court. The 30-day assessment program component involves evaluation services only. The long-term preventive program is treatment oriented and offers individual and family therapy, various group therapeutic opportunities and a mentoring component.

The short-term assessment program handles approximately 100 referrals per month, while the long-term prevention portion of the program has the capacity to manage 60 cases at a time.

The services provided by the program involve collaborations with agencies and government entities that are appropriate for the nature of the case: ACS in child abuse and neglect cases; Kings County Hospital in psychiatric emergency cases; the Department of Mental Health (DMH) Mobile Crisis Unit in less urgent cases that would be more effectively evaluated in the home; the Waiver Program (home-based care) for cases involving children with chronic

⁹ Pending relocation to the new Kings County Family Court Courthouse.

mental health problems; after school programs; and substance abuse programs. The program staff hopes to facilitate more contact with the DOE for special education evaluations.

Staff Training

Training for PINS Preventive Services consists of a five-day orientation for all new employees. Ongoing in-service education programs address a variety of relevant topics such as substance abuse, sexually exploited teens, adolescent growth and development, the Family Court process and the dynamics of family therapy.

C. *The Children's Law Center (CLC)*

Contact Person:	Carol Sherman, Executive Director
Contact Information	E-mail: csherman@clcnny.org Telephone: (718) 522-3333, ext. 123 or (718) 643-6168 (Courthouse)
Mailing Address:	44 Court Street, 11th Floor Brooklyn, NY 11201
Courthouse Location:	Room 5045
Staff Roster:	Attorneys-16 (includes Executive Director, Deputy Director, and Assistant Director) Social Workers-5 Case Worker-1 Administrative Staff-6
Source(s) of Funding:	New York State Office of Court Administration

Program Description

CLC provides legal representation for children in custody/visitation, domestic violence, guardianship, and related proceedings. In 2004, the Brooklyn component of CLC's total caseload numbered 3,500. The Family Court appoints CLC lawyers; thus, individuals cannot access legal services on their own. CLC attorneys engage in a collaborative practice model with the social work staff and with community providers, such as parenting programs, domestic violence services and mental health facilities. The Center also works in concert with individual mental health practitioners who prepare forensic evaluations for the Family Court. For additional information concerning this program, see the portion of this report devoted to the Bronx County Family Court.

Staff Training

Staff training models for CLC attorneys include those focused on substantive legal issues, interviewing skills, case and trial preparation, and litigation strategies. Interdisciplinary trainings for both the legal and the social work staff include subjects such as child development and domestic violence. In addition to in-house training, the staff participates in outside conferences and continuing education programs.

D. *Courtroom Advocates Project (CAP)*

Courthouse Location:	Petition Room and Intake Part
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Program Description and Contact Information
See Richmond County.

E. *Court Appointed Special Advocates (CASA)*

Courthouse Location: 12th Floor, Room 12.138

Program Description
See New York County.

F. *The Legal Aid Society, Juvenile Rights Division*

Contact Person: Karen Simmons, Attorney-in-Charge

Contact Information: E-mail: kpsimmons@legal-aid.org
Telephone: (718) 250-4203

Mailing Address: 111 Livingston Street, 8th Floor
Brooklyn, NY 11201

Courthouse Location: Room 3112

Staff Roster: Attorneys-32
Social Workers-11
Paralegals-6
Investigator-1
Managers-9
Clerical Staff-6

Source(s) of Funding: New York State

Program Description

The Juvenile Rights Division (JRD) of the Legal Aid Society is appointed by the Family Court to represent children and youth in a variety of family court matters. JRD Attorneys serve as Law Guardians in child protective cases and in custody cases, and they serve as defense attorneys in Persons in Need of Supervision (PINS) cases and in delinquency cases. Attorneys engage in a collaborative multidisciplinary model for client representation that includes interaction with other JRD staff and with outside agencies. The Division also maintains an Appeals Unit and a Special Litigation/Law Reform Unit (212-577-3300).

Staff Training

JRD attorneys are admitted to the New York State Bar. In addition to a law degree, some attorneys have other graduate degrees, as well. All social workers are masters prepared and licensed to practice in New York State as LMSWs. Paralegals are either graduates of certificate programs or hold college degrees. New employees receive specific training in the substance and the process of family law representation. All employees are subject to regular and ongoing supervision.

G. *Legal Information for Families Today (LIFT)*

Courthouse Location: 1st Floor Lobby and 6th Floor, adjacent to the Petition Room

Program Description and Contact Information

See New York County.

H. *NYC Department of Education/Court Liaison Project*

Contact Person: Diana Doville, Court Liaison
Catherine Sevos, Coordinator

Contact Information: E-mail: ddoville@nycboe.net
Telephone: (718) 802-2622; (646) 996-9771

Courthouse Location: 11th floor, cubicle #55

Staff Roster: Court Liaison-1

Source(s) of Funding: NYC Department of Education

Program Description

See Bronx County.

I. *The New York City Family Court Child Permanency Mediation Program*

Contact Person: May Ping Szeto
Jenny Psaki

Contact Information: Telephone: (718) 243-9480 or (347) 401-9635(6)

Courthouse Location: Room 5031

Program Description

See New York County.

J. *The New York City Family Court Mediation Program*

Contact Person: Tziporah Pronman, Mediation Manager, Borough of Brooklyn

Contact Information: Telephone: (718) 532-9990

Courthouse Location: Suite 12.138, Room 12.103

Program Description

See New York County.

K. *Safe Horizon Family Court Program*

Contact Person: Rachel Andron

Contact Information	E-mail: randron@safehorizon.org Telephone: (718) 834-7440
Courthouse Location:	Suite 12.138
Staff Roster:	Attorney-1 Social Workers (MSW)-2 Case Managers-4 fulltime, 3 part time Client Advocate-1 Teacher-1
Source(s) of Funding	New York City New York State

Program Description

The Safe Horizon Kings County Family Court Program operates six different programmatic components:

Reception Center: The Center is a way station for victims who are awaiting a family court proceeding and who wish to avoid contact with the opposing party.
Number served: 600-800 persons/month

Case Management Petition Room Advocacy: Case managers provide to victims assistance with: (1) crisis intervention and the preparation of the family offense petition, (2) an explanation of the court process for obtaining an Order of Protection, (3) referrals to domestic violence shelters, (4) obtaining emergency housing, and (5) referrals to long term counseling and to legal services.

Services are accessible to the public on a walk-in basis. Safe Horizon case managers also receive referrals from clerical staff in the Petition Room, judges, court officers, the District Attorney's Office, the Corporation Counsel's Office and domestic violence service providers.
Number served: 150 persons/month

Restitution Program: Safe Horizon assists families eligible for restitution, pursuant to filing a family offense petition, with collecting documentary evidence of current and projected financial losses.

Children's Center: See "Safe Horizon Children's Center" below.

Supervised Visitation: The program provides a safe and well-monitored venue for non-custodial parents to visit with their children pursuant to court order. The referring judge is updated on the progress of the visits and provided with a report at the conclusion of the term of the supervised visits. Families are provided with follow-up referrals to services based upon their needs.
Number served: 25 families/month

Night Court Assistance (2nd Floor across from the Petition Room): The program provides assistance with filing Orders of Protection during evening hours on Tuesdays and Thursdays from 5:30 p.m-8:00 p.m.

Overall, Safe Horizon's Brooklyn-based family court programs intersect with a host of community resources that provide legal and social services to victims of domestic violence.

Staff Training

The Director is both an attorney and a social worker. The staff attend mandatory training in substantive areas such as domestic violence (including its particular effects on children), child abuse and the criminal justice system.

L. *Safe Horizon Children's Center*

Contact Person:	Lillian Soto, Head Teacher
Contact Information:	E-mail: lilliansoto@safehorizon.org Telephone: (718) 643-4624
Courthouse Location:	First Floor (adjacent to the elevators)
Staff Roster:	Nursery Attendants –2 Teacher-1
Source(s) of Funding:	Office of Court Administration (New York State) New York City Private Donors and Foundations

Program Description

The Children's Center is a childcare resource for parents who have scheduled court appearances in the Family Court. The Center accommodates children from infancy up to twelve years of age. Age appropriate activities and snacks are provided.

The Center cares for 180 children per month. Families are made aware of the service via fliers that are distributed in the lobby of the courthouse and by signage directing parents to the Center. Children's Center staff collaborate with other Safe Horizon programs, as appropriate. Referrals also are made available for community-based childcare programs, head start and child health and nutrition programs.

Staff Training

The Children's Center staff receive training provided by the Office of Court Administration (OCA) in the identification of child abuse and neglect, substance abuse and domestic violence. The head teacher holds a Bachelor's Degree in education and is an employee of Safe Horizon. The Nursery Attendants, one of whom has an Associate's Degree in childcare, are both employed by OCA.

NEW YORK COUNTY (MANHATTAN) FAMILY COURT
60 Lafayette Street
New York, NY 10013

A. *18-B Assigned Counsel*

Contact Person: Colleen Samuels

Contact Information: Telephone: (212) 946-2877

Courthouse Location: 18-B Panel Room, 5th Floor

Staff Roster: 18-B attorneys are private practitioners who are assigned to family law cases by the Court. They serve on panels administered by each of the Appellate Court Departments.

Source(s) of Funding: The Appellate Division and the City and the State of New York.

Program Description

The Court assigns counsel (called “18B attorneys”) to represent indigent family members in many family law matters including abuse and neglect cases, child support cases when there is a risk of incarceration, custody and visitation cases, and delinquency proceedings. Individuals cannot contact 18-B attorneys directly for services; rather, the court assigns unrepresented clients to 18-B attorneys. 18-B attorneys customarily collaborate with other organizations involved with the client that are relevant to the case.

Staff Training

After an application process, the 18-B panel determines whether the private practitioner could benefit from training in particular areas and offers continuing legal education.

B. *Courtroom Advocates Project (CAP)*

Courthouse Location: Petition Room and Intake Part

Program Description and Contact Information

See Richmond County.

C. *Court Appointed Special Advocates (CASA)*

Contact Person: Pam Geraghty, Advocate Director

Contact Information: E-mail: pgeraghty@casa-nyc.org
Telephone: (212) 334-4010 x129

Mailing Address: 350 Broadway, Suite 1107
New York, NY 10013

Courthouse Location: Room 6C3

Staff Roster: Borough Supervisor – 1 (same in each borough except Staten Island)
Borough Coordinator – 1 (same in each borough except Staten Island)
Volunteers – 16 (there are 100 throughout NYC)

Source(s) of Funding: Federal, State, Institutional and Private

Program Description

The Court assigns cases to CASA, whose volunteers gather information about a child's care. The judge assigns CASA a specific task, e.g., monitoring and facilitating completion of interstate compact placement agreements, monitoring medication, locating after-school programs or finding home treatment. After CASA conducts an investigation, it reports its findings to the Family Court judge. CASA works with approximately 125 clients in Manhattan and works closely with The Legal Aid Society-Juvenile Rights Division, the Center for Family Representation, the Administration for Children's Services, early intervention providers and foster care agencies.

Staff Training

The Borough Coordinators and the Borough Supervisors are Licensed Masters Degree Social Workers. The volunteers receive training from the staff at the main office at 350 Broadway.

D. *Lawyers for Children (LFC)*

Contact Person: Glenn Metsch-Ampel, Esq., Deputy Executive Director

Contact Information: E-mail: gmampel@lawyersforchildren.org
Telephone: (212) 966-6420 or (800) 244-2540 (main office)
Telephone: (212) 233-4311 (Courthouse)

Mailing Address: 110 Lafayette Street
New York, NY 10013

Courthouse Location: 6C15/6

Staff Roster: Courthouse Staff: 1 receptionist (from 9am to 1pm)
Main Office Staff: Attorneys - 16
Social workers - 16
Support staff - 5

Source(s) of Funding: Approximately 60% of LFC's funding comes from the Unified Court System; additional funding comes from foundations and individual donors.

Project Description

Lawyers for Children (LFC) provides direct legal advocacy and social work services to youth voluntarily placed in foster care, as well as to those who are the subject of abuse and/or neglect, termination of parental rights, custody, visitation and guardianship petitions. The agency operates using a unique interdisciplinary team approach to child advocacy. Every child

represented by LFC is assigned to both an attorney and to a social worker to advocate on their behalf. LFC's facilities in the New York County courthouse are available to its attorneys and to clients to confer and to wait until their case is called before the Court. LFC's court offices include a comfortable lounge for clients and families, as well as a reception office and a small office for staff. LFC's main offices are located three blocks from the courthouse.

LFC provides legal and social work advocacy to over 4,000 clients per year in all five boroughs, with the majority of the cases located in the New York County Family Court. Cases are usually assigned to LFC by the Court, but LFC also will accept cases directly from young people who ask the agency for legal assistance. LFC has created a special rights handbook, written for children and advocates. It is available free of charge to clients and to those who provide direct services to families. Client services are available in English, Spanish and French. LFC will hire translators for other foreign languages on a case-by-case basis as needed. LFC also maintains special projects within its office that focus on the following areas of child advocacy: domestic violence, child sexual abuse, immigration, gay, lesbian, bi-sexual, transgender questioning youth, impact litigation and child welfare policy.

Staff Training

All LFC attorneys are admitted to the New York State Bar and all social workers have MSW level credentials. The entire staff receives training under the auspices of LFC in collaboration with other experts in the field. LFC is a certified provider of continuing legal education in New York State.

E. *The Legal Aid Society, Juvenile Rights Division*

Contact Person: Lou Sartori, Attorney-in-Charge of Manhattan Trial Office

Contact Information: E-mail: lssartori@legal-aid.org
Telephone: (212) 312-2366

Courthouse Location: Room 9A

Staff Roster: Attorneys - 29
 Social Workers - 10
 Paralegals - 8
 Investigator - 1
 Managers - 9
 Clerical Staff - 7

Source(s) of Funding: New York State

Program Description

See Kings County.

F. *Legal Information for Families Today (LIFT)*

Contact Person: Melissa Beck, Executive Director

Contact Information: Telephone: (646) 613-9633 / HOTLINE: (212) 343-1122

Mailing Address: 350 Broadway, Suite 307
New York, NY 10013-3911

Staff Roster: Executive Director – 1
Director of Court Programs - 1
Director of Community Programs - 1
Staff - 10

Source(s) of Funding: Individual and foundation contributions, and city and state funding.

Program Description

LIFT operates Education & Information Sites (EI) in the Bronx, Brooklyn, Manhattan and Queens Family Courts. From those locations, LIFT serves approximately 18,000 families per year citywide by providing information about family law, child welfare, courthouse procedures, and referrals to social and legal services. At the EI Sites, LIFT also offers resource guides available on a range of family law topics in Spanish and English; some are also available in Chinese, Haitian Creole, Korean, and Russian. Education materials produced by other public interest organizations are also available. LIFT services can be accessed by either visiting the tables in the lobbies of the Family Courthouses, calling its hotline, or accessing its internet site to download materials at www.liftonline.org. LIFT also offers workshops for neighborhood-based organizations and community groups upon request.

Staff Training

LIFT's Executive Director is an attorney. Most staff members have a bachelor's degree and one staff member has a master's degree. All staff members receive intensive training on family law and family court issues.

G. *Mental Health Services*

Contact Person: Anita Shin, Senior Administrator

Contact Information: E-mail: fcmh.admin@nychhc.org
Telephone: (212) 442-4488

Mailing Address: 60 Lafayette Street, Rm. 6D
New York, NY 10013

Courthouse Location: 6C13/6

Staff Roster: Senior Psychologists – 10
Senior Psychiatrist – 1
Office Management – 1

Source(s) of Funding: NYC Health and Hospitals Corporation

Program Description

See Bronx County.

H. NYC Department of Education/Court Liaison Project

Contact Person(s): Diane McCorkle, Court Liaison
Catherine Sevos, Coordinator

Contact Information: E-mail: dmccorkle@nycboe.net
Telephone: (212) 442-8548 (Court Liaison)
Telephone: (646) 996-9771 (Coordinator)

Courthouse Location: 3C7

Program Description
See Bronx County.

I. The New York City Family Court Child Permanency Mediation Program

Contact Person: Catherine Friedman, NYC Family Court ADR Coordinator
Dan Rayner, Borough of Manhattan

Contact Information: E-mail: cfriedma@courts.state.ny.us
Telephone: (646) 386-5402 (C. Friedman)
Telephone: (212) 791-0404 or (646) 386-5403 (CPMP in Manhattan)

Mailing Address: 60 Lafayette Street
New York, NY 10013

Courthouse Location: Room 4 E 1

Staff Roster: Mediators- 7
Program Coordinators-2
(Two mediators and one coordinator are based in each county.)

Source(s) of Funding: The program is funded through the Family Court, the State and other not-for-profit sources. It is operated in collaboration with the New York Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children.

Program Description

This is a Family Court administered program, which provides mediation services to parties with court cases involving child protection and child permanency issues, including termination of parental rights petitions. It also provides planning with and for other children in foster care. The Program's goal is to serve several hundred families per year citywide.

The Judge or the Referee hearing the case is the only one that may refer cases to the program. However, attorneys or individuals may request that the Court make a referral.

Staff Training

Mediators have extensive general mediation training, as well as specific training in child permanency mediation. They have backgrounds in law, social work and child welfare.

J. *The New York City Family Court Mediation Program*

Contact Person: Catherine Friedman, NYC Family Court ADR Coordinator
Carolyn Lawler, Mediation Manager, Borough of Manhattan

Contact Information: E-mail: cfriedma@courts.state.ny.us
Telephone: (646) 386-5402 (C. Friedman)
Telephone: (212) 871-9985 (C. Lawler)

Mailing Address: New York City Family Court ADR Coordinator
60 Lafayette Street
New York, NY 10013

Courthouse Location: Room 4 E 10

Staff Roster: Mediation Managers (one in each Borough)

Source(s) of Funding: The program is funded through the New York City Family Court
and it is operated in collaboration with Community Mediation
Services, which administers the program.

Program Description

This program provides voluntary, confidential mediation services to people with court cases involving custody or visitation issues and parent/child (PINS) disputes after a petition has been filed with the Court. There is a Mediation Manager in each courthouse that receives referrals and screens each case to make sure it is appropriate for mediation. If the case is appropriate, it is given to a mediator selected from a roster of experienced practitioners. Any agreement that is reached by the participants is sent back to the referring judge or referee where, if approved by either, it can become an order of the Court. Parties may attend mediation sessions by themselves, with an attorney, or they may consult with counsel before signing any agreement.

The program's goal is to serve several hundred families per year citywide. The Judge or the Referee hearing the case is the only one that can refer cases to the program. However, attorneys or individuals may request that the court make a referral. Where appropriate, the program may provide parties with additional resources.

Staff Training

The mediators have extensive general mediation training, as well as specific training in custody/visitation and/or PINS mediation. They have backgrounds in a variety of areas and all were selected for the program roster because of their extensive experience handling these types of cases. The mediators also are state-certified.

K. *New York Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children (NYSPCC)*

Contact Person: Stephen Forrester, Esq.

Contact Information: E-mail: sforrester@nyspcc.org
Telephone: (212) 233-5500

Mailing Address: 161 William Street, 9th Floor
New York, NY 10038

Courthouse Location: A8, A11

Staff Roster: Program Directors - 8
Professional staff members - 28
Support staff members - 7

Source(s) of Funding: Individuals, foundations, corporations and government sources

Program Description

NYSPCC provides mental health, legal and educational services to vulnerable New York City children and families. Its range of programs includes:

The Positive Parenting Plus Initiative, a therapeutic supervised visitation program that focuses on promoting healthy parenting through skills training, education and guidance.

Voices for Children, a guardian ad litem program that conducts investigations of a child's home/school environment after allegations of abuse or neglect and which provides representation for children in custody, visitation, family offense, paternity, abuse and neglect and foster care proceedings.

The Child Permanency Mediation Program, which provides a child-centered, family-focused approach to finding and planning permanent homes for abused and neglected children in foster care (see also "New York City Child Permanency Mediation Program", above).

The Trauma Recovery Program, which helps children recover from physical and/or sexual abuse, family violence or parental substance abuse and/or mental illness.

Education for professionals and advocacy for legislation to protect children.

NYSPCC serves approximately 3,000 children and families each year.

NYSPCC receives the majority of referrals for its services from the New York City Family Court system and from ACS. NYSPCC also receives referrals from the New York City School system in the borough of Manhattan. It also serves as a resource for professionals from New York and around the country for its child abuse training courses and workshops.

The New York City Family Court is a strong supporter and collaborates with NYSPCC on a regular basis. Since the early 1970's, NYSPCC has maintained an office in the New York County Family Court, which is staffed by attorneys, investigators, outreach and support staff of the NYSPCC Voices for Children and Guardian Ad Litem Programs. As of 2003, NYSPCC maintains office space in the New York County Family Court for its Child Permanency Mediation Program.

NYSPCC is a member of the New York City Family Court Advisory Committee convened by Judge Joseph M. Lauria, the Administrative Judge of the New York City Family Court. The Committee is made up of the principal institutional entities operating in New York City's Family Courts. The Advisory Committee meets regularly to inform members of important developments in the Court and to obtain input on family court issues from each agency's perspective. The senior management of NYSPCC also serve on the New York City Family

Court Advisory Committee's Child Welfare subcommittee and its Custody and Visitation subcommittee.

NYSPCC has a long-standing collaborative relationship with ACS. NYSPCC's Executive Director, Dr. Mary L. Pulido, currently serves on ACS's Advisory Board and also is a member of the ACS Medical and Mental Health Services subcommittee and the Child Protection subcommittee of the Advisory Board.

NYSPCC receives referrals from legal service providers throughout New York City, including the Children's Law Center, Lawyers for Children and The Legal Aid Society. NYSPCC also works closely with a number of domestic violence service providers, including Safe Horizon, the New York Asian Women's Center, Sanctuary for Families and Alianza Dominicana to identify and to assist children and parents who have a history of domestic abuse. In 1993, working in partnership with Columbia University and Alianza Dominicana, NYSPCC established a child abuse and neglect prevention home visitation program (Best Beginnings), which has since been replicated in 28 program sites throughout New York State.

NYSPCC also partners with numerous New York City public schools to provide students with therapeutic services. Services have been and continue to be provided to Tompkins Square School, I.S. 131, P.S. 1, M.S. 131 and Millennium High School. NYSPCC is a member of the Supervised Visitation Network, an international organization of supervised visitation providers.

Staff Training

All NYSPCC Program Directors have Masters degrees. Every effort is made to hire and retain culturally competent staff that represent the community served by NYSPCC's programs. NYSPCC provides ongoing in-house staff training, as well as instate and out-of-state workshops and seminars to ensure that the staff are aware of the latest developments in the child welfare arena. All staff members working directly with families in the Positive Parenting Plus and Trauma Recovery Programs are required to be Masters prepared clinicians.

L. *Safe Horizon Manhattan Family Court Program*

Contact Person: Yanet Santiago, Site Director

Contact Information: Telephone: (212) 577-1271

Courthouse Location: 4F16/4

Staff Roster: Director (Domestic Violence Program) – 1
 Educational Director (Children's Center) – 1
 Case Managers (Domestic Violence Program) – 3
 Client Advocate (Domestic Violence Program) – 1
 Head Teacher (Children's Center) – 1
 Assistant Teacher (Children's Center) – 1

Source(s) of Funding: The domestic violence programs receive funding from New York City; the Children's Center receives funding from New York City Department of Health, Agency for Child Development within the Administration for Children's Services, as well as other funds from New York City.

Program Description

See Kings County.

M. *Safe Horizon Children's Center*

Contact Person: Yanet Santiago, Site Director

Contact Information: Telephone: (212) 577-1274

Courthouse Location: 1F/1

Staff Roster: City Wide Director – 1
 Manhattan Site Director – 1
 Head Teacher – 1
 Other Staff – 3

Source(s) of Funding: State funding

Program Description

See Kings County.

In the Manhattan Family Court location, the Center has established a free lunch program in cooperation with the nearby Rescue Mission. The Center also collaborates with Foster Grandparents, which provides childcare volunteers, and Literacy Inc, which helps children learn to read.

QUEENS COUNTY FAMILY COURT
151-20 Jamaica Avenue
Jamaica, NY 11432

A. *Administration for Children’s Services (ACS)/Family Assessment Program*

Program Description

See Kings County.

B. *Courtroom Advocates Project (CAP)*

Courthouse Location: Petition Room and Intake Part

Program Description

See Richmond County.

C. *Court Appointed Special Advocates (CASA)*

Courthouse Location: Rm. A490

Program Description

See New York County.

D. *Family Support Services Unit*

Contact Person: Jean Germain

Contact Information: Telephone: (718) 625-3152

Courthouse Location: 4th Floor/Agency Part

Program Description

The unit provides services for families with court-related child support issues. Individuals can go to the office directly to seek child support modifications or to seek assistance with enforcing an existing order. The individual seeking help must provide the respondent parent’s current address, the respondent parent’s social security number and document the respondent parent’s paternity establishment status. There is no cost to families for these services.

E. *The Legal Aid Society, Juvenile Rights Division*

Contact Person: Kim McLaurin, Attorney-in Charge

Contact Information: E-mail: kmmclaurin@legal-aid.org
Telephone: (718) 298-8914

Mailing Address: 90-04 161st Street
Jamaica, NY 11432

Courthouse Location: Room A-480

Staff Roster: Attorneys - 22
Social Workers - 7
Paralegals - 5
Investigator - 1
Managers - 5
Clerical Staff - 4

Source(s) of Funding: New York State

Program Description
See Kings County.

F. *Legal Information for Families Today (LIFT)*

Courthouse Location: Courthouse Lobby

Program Description
See New York County.

G. *Mental Health Services*

Contact Person: Richard LoRe

Contact Information: E-mail: Richard.Lore@nychhc.org
Telephone: (718) 658-3600

Courthouse Location: Room A-460

Program Description
Mental Health Services provides neutral, court-ordered forensic evaluations of family court litigants, but it does not provide treatment. Mental Health Services collaborates with all court agencies and personnel involved with the individuals being evaluated.

Staff Training
The psychologists have PhDs and the psychiatrist has an MD.

H. *NYC Department of Education/Court Liaison*

Contact Person: Pat Faraglia, Court Liaison

Contact Information: E-mail: pfaraglia@nycboe.net
Telephone: (718) 291-8613

Courthouse location: B103

Staff Roster: Court Liaison – 1

Source(s) of Funding: NYC Department of Education

Program Description

See Bronx County.

I. *The New York City Family Court Child Permanency Mediation Program*

Contact Information: Stephanie Pearl
 Gina Ritcey

Contact Information: Telephone: (718) 298-0113

Courthouse Location: Room CAP 4E

Program Description

See New York County.

J. *The New York City Family Court Mediation Program*

Contact Person: Sarah Samuels

Contact Information: Telephone: (718) 657-4682

Courthouse Location: Room 485

Program Description

See New York County.

K. *Safe Horizon Family Court Program*

Contact Person: Nancy Shea, Site Director

Contact Information: Telephone: (718) 262-0202 or (718) 262-0203 Ext. 16

Court Location: 2nd Floor

Staff Roster: Director – 1
 Case Managers (Domestic Violence Program) –3
 Client Advocate (Domestic Violence Program) – 1
 Supervised Visitation Program – 4
 Social Worker – 1

Source(s) of Funding: The program receives funding from CDTL, HRA, VAWA and OCFS.

Program Description

See Kings County.

L. *Safe Horizon Children's Center*

Contact Person: Olga Nazab, Head Teacher

Courthouse Location: Room 180

Program Description
See Kings County.

RICHMOND COUNTY (STATEN ISLAND) FAMILY COURT
100 Richmond Terrace
Staten Island, NY 10301

A. *Courtroom Advocates Project (CAP), Sanctuary for Families*
Center for Battered Women's Legal Services

Contact Person:	Jennifer Friedman, Director
Contact Information	E-mail: Jennifer@sffny.org Telephone: (212) 349-6009 ext. 270
Courthouse Location:	Office of the Petition Clerk and the Intake Part
Mailing Address:	Sanctuary for Families P. O. Box 1406, Wall Street Station New York, NY 10268
Staff Roster: ¹⁰	Director - 1 Deputy Director - 1 Supervising Attorneys –3 (fulltime) Supervising Attorney (night court)-1 (part time) Law students from 10 area law schools and summer associates from 35 New York based law firms Project Assistant - 1
Source(s) of Funding	New York State Foundation grants Private donors

Program Description

The Courtroom Advocates Project (CAP) is a citywide initiative that provides legal services to pro se litigants seeking orders of protection from domestic violence in Family Court. The most recent statistics (FY '04) demonstrate that CAP provided assistance to 1,351 victims of domestic violence. CAP recruits, trains and supervises law student volunteers who then serve as advocates for pro se petitioners. The specific services provided by advocates include: drafting petitions for orders of protection, accompanying victims to intake court appearances and providing oral advocacy, following up with victims afterwards and returning with victims to court for later court appearances (adjourn dates).

CAP staff attorneys represent victims with more complex cases, e.g., ones that involve custody and/or visitation, and child support in addition to the protective order petition. CAP attorneys also represent victims in related matrimonial matters.

Victims who seek assistance with petitioning the Court for protection from family violence may self-initiate contact with the program in the local family courthouses. Individuals may also contact CAP via the Sanctuary for Families help line.

¹⁰ The Staff Roster refers to the citywide program initiative.

CAP collaborates with the numerous legal service initiatives available under the auspices of Sanctuary's Center for Battered Women's Legal Services, which provides legal assistance for immigration, child protection and matrimonial matters. The CAP program also collaborates with the counseling and shelter services within Sanctuary's organizational structure. In addition, it works with community service providers such as Safe Horizon and advocacy groups such as the Arab-American Family Support Center, New York Asian Women's Center, SAKHI for South Asian Women, Korean American Family Service, Seamen's Society for Children and Families and Nuevo Amanecer.

In addition to providing direct legal services, CAP attorneys also have become advocates for improving the court process for domestic violence victims.

Staff Training

All attorneys in the CAP program are graduates of an accredited law school. The project assistant is a college graduate with experience in legal and social services advocacy for victims. The CAP staff participate in trainings sponsored by Sanctuary's Center for Battered Women's Legal Services.

B. *The Legal Aid Society, Juvenile Rights Division*

Contact Person: Allison Haltmaier, Assistant Attorney-in-Charge

Contact Information: E-mail: afhaltmaier@legal-aid.org
Telephone: (718) 981-6740

Mailing Address: 60 Bay Street, 2nd Floor
Staten Island, NY 10301

Courthouse Location: Room B2

Staff Roster: Attorneys – 4
Social Worker - 1
Paralegal - 1
Managers - 3
Clerical Staff - 1

Source(s) of Funding: New York State

Program Description

See Kings County.

C. *Legal Services of New York (LSNY)*

Contact Person: Nancy Goldhill, Project Director

Contact Information: E-mail: ngoldhill@lsny.org
Telephone: (718) 233-6490

Mailing Address: 36 Richmond Terrace
Staten Island, NY 10301

Staff Roster: Attorney - 1 (Project Director)
Attorneys - 2 (Staff)
Office Manager - 1

Source(s) of Funding: Federal
New York State
New York City
Private Donors

Program Description

LSNY provides advice and legal representation to individuals involved with family law related matters. Agency attorneys also advise clients on issues relating to accessing and/or maintaining government benefits. This family law project is new, having opened an office in December 2004.

Individuals may contact the LSNY office directly. Clients also come to the agency by way of referrals from community providers with which LSNY maintains contact for the purpose of maximizing its service to the individuals and families it serves. Project attorneys refer clients to community-based programs, as well as agencies providing services to domestic violence victims and families of children in foster care or at risk of foster care placement.

Staff Training

Staff attorneys receive regular training on representing clients in family court proceedings.

D. *The New York City Family Court Mediation Program*

Contact Information: Contact via New York County Office

Program Description

See New York County.

E. *Safe Horizon Staten Island Family Court Program*

Contact Person: Anne Patterson, Director

Contact Information: E-mail: Apatterson@safehorizon.org
Telephone: (718) 447-3820, Ext. 16, 20

Mailing Address: 130 Stuyvesant Place, 5th Floor
Staten Island, NY 10301

Courthouse Location: Owing to space constraints in the courthouse, Safe Horizon programs are based at 51 Stuyvesant Place, Room 302 (Children's Program, two blocks from the courthouse) and 130 Stuyvesant Place, 5th floor.

Staff Roster: Social Worker (MSW) - 1
Senior Case Manager - 1

Case Manager - 1
Integrated Domestic Violence Court Counselor - 1

Source(s) of Funding: New York City
New York State

Program Description

The Safe Horizon Staten Island Family Court Program operates several program components in Staten Island as described below. As noted above, the primary program activity takes place in an offsite, but nearby location. Court Officers direct litigants to the Safe Horizon Case Manager when she is onsite and to the offsite location when she is not.

Counseling Services (51 Stuyvesant Place): The Senior Case Manager provides individual counseling and case management services to crime victims with current or prior family court case involvement. Clients primarily include domestic violence victims; however, services are available to any crime victim requesting assistance.

Petition Room: The staff assists domestic violence victims with filing family offense petitions by explaining the court process and the relief that is available to them. The Case Manager is onsite at the courthouse from two to five days per week, depending upon the time of year. The Case Manager reaches out to litigants who need help filing these petitions.

Children's Center: The Center is located at 51 Stuyvesant Place (see above). Signs directing parents to the exact location of the Center are posted in the courthouse lobby and court officers routinely direct parents entering the courthouse with small children to the off-site location. The Children's Center provides structured educational childcare for children during their parents' court proceedings. The Children's Center staff also provides families with information about community resources and child focused government-sponsored entitlement programs.

Restitution: Safe Horizon assists families eligible for restitution, pursuant to filing a family offense petition, with collecting documentary evidence of current and projected financial losses. Petitioners are advised of their rights to petition the Court for restitution by the Case Manager at the time of filing the Family Offense Petition.

Staff Training

See Kings County.

F. *Seamen's Society for Families and Children Safe Passage Program*

Contact Person: Jessica Amyotte, Domestic Violence Supervisor

Contact Information: E-mail: jessicaa@roots-wings.org
Telephone: (888) 837-6687 ext. 4787

Mailing Address: 25 Hyatt Street
Staten Island, NY 10301

Courthouse Location: Caseworkers are stationed in the courthouse lobby

Staff Roster: Supervisor - 1
Case Workers - 4

Source(s) of Funding: New York City

Program Description

The Seaman's Society for Families and Children provides individual and group counseling for domestic violence victims. Support groups are conducted at the Society's office, the location of which is noted above. An agency caseworker is stationed at the courthouse one day per week to assist victims with filing Family Offense Petitions and to accompany them to the court proceeding if necessary. Victims can access services via the court-based case worker or by calling the agency for assistance. The Society does outreach in the community by contacting other agencies, local businesses and attending resource fairs. It serves approximately 100 victims per month.

Staff Training

The Society collaborates with Sanctuary for Families' CAP program for staff training.

Conclusion

As stated in the Introduction to this report, the AFCC convened a task force to survey family court services nationwide. The purpose of the study was twofold: (1) to determine the challenges facing family court service providers, and (2) to highlight commendable programs serving families who use the nation's family courts. Upon completion of the survey, the AFCC Court Services Task Force issued a report, which includes descriptions of representative programs available in family courts that the Task Force determined to be responsive to the needs of families and children.¹¹ We used the AFCC report as a model for our categorization of the services currently available in the New York City Family Courts. Our analysis, however, is not meant to assess or evaluate the quality of the services or to endorse any particular provider.

Our findings in the New York City area demonstrate a broad spectrum of family court services across the five jurisdictions. They include services for domestic violence victims and their children, pro se litigants and their children, juveniles and their families, and families involved in child dependency matters. In two jurisdictions, professionals that perform forensic evaluations have onsite offices,¹² while in other boroughs individual and group counseling are available to support parents involved in Persons in Need of Assistance (PINS) cases.¹³ Clearly, some providers offer multiple services across all of the categories we have chosen. For example, the *Children's Services*' category, as noted below, includes some programs that also fall within other classifications.

We have presented below the breadth and depth of court services for families by using a matrix, which sets forth jurisdiction-by-jurisdiction the type and number of services in each of the categories we selected. The matrix, of course, only will reflect the service providers that participated in the survey; thus it is not an absolute representation of the extent of services in any of the five family courthouses characterized in this report. As previously stated, the services

¹¹ See *supra*, note 2.

¹² See Bronx County and New York County.

¹³ See Kings County.

listed within the following descriptive framework are classified like the service categories identified in the AFCC Court Services Task Force report.¹⁴ The applicable classifications, along with the addition of *Domestic Violence Victims' Services* and *Mental Health Services* include: *Access to Justice, Children's Services, Dispute Resolution Services and Parenting Support*.¹⁵

**New York City Family Court
Family Services Matrix**

Types of Service	Number of Services				
	Bronx County	Kings County	New York County	Queens County	Richmond County
Access to Justice Programs	6	5	5	6	5
Children's Services	2	4	5	4	1
Dispute Resolution Services	2	2	2	2	1
Parenting Support	3	5	3	5	2
Domestic Violence Victims Services	2	2	2	2	3
Mental Health Services	1	1	1	1	1

Although there are, in most cases, an adequate range of services for families and children in each of the jurisdictions, we believe that there could be some general improvement in the manner in which these programs, both in the courthouse and offsite, communicate and collaborate with one another within each borough. In addition, we specifically note that Richmond County Family Court and Bronx County Family Court have relatively fewer *Children's Services* than other jurisdictions. Overall, *Access to Justice Programs* are more plentiful than are other services. In light of the recent census demonstrating the Bronx to be the “nation’s poorest urban county,”¹⁶ it seems important to take that into account when allocating resources for family court services in the Bronx County Family Court.

The results of our survey indicate the following recommendations for change:

¹⁴ See *supra*, note 2.

¹⁵ See *id.*

¹⁶ Ed Morales, “Nickels and Dimes,” N.Y. Times, Oct. 8, 2005 at sec. 14.1.

1. Establish a regular forum for family court service providers in each jurisdiction for the purpose of fostering increased communication and collaboration.
2. Create annual family services reports in each jurisdiction, which update provider information and incorporate relevant data concerning each program.
3. Implement additions to the complement of in-court services and augment existing programs based upon empirical data contained in these annual reports.

New child permanency legislation, signed into law by Governor Pataki at the end of August 2005, calls for streamlining the court process in child welfare cases to minimize the possibility of children languishing in foster care for long periods of time. Given the goals of this important legislation, it is critical that the family court system act now to implement strategies to enhance resources for families. With greater resources available in every courthouse, these goals are more likely to be realized, as will the overarching goal of ensuring that all family court litigants receive optimal services from the Court.

April 2006

ATTACHMENT A

Family Court Project Questionnaire

Location in County Courthouse: _____

Organization Name: _____

Contact Information:	E-mail	_____
	Phone	_____
	Address	_____

Contact Person: _____

Title/Position: _____

1. Description of Organization

(a) What type of services does the organization provide? (social work, legal, information)

(b) Categories of employees and numbers of employees within each category?

(c) Training of employees? (social work, psychological, legal)

(d) Source of funding for organization? (city, state, private) Have the budget cuts had any impact on the organization?

2. Work with Families

(a) Number of families/individuals for whom the organization provides services?

(b) How does it establish contact with families/individuals? Can an individual directly contact the organization for assistance? Are the services court-ordered?

(c) Does it collaborate with other service providers? Which ones? In what context? (Does it generally collaborate with other organizations or does it specifically collaborate with those organizations working with the same family/individual?) Is collaboration a part of the customary practice of organization?

3. Additional Comments

ATTACHMENT B

NEW YORK CITY FAMILY COURTS' SERVICE TO LITIGANTS:

FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Introduction

For many families, walking through the doors of Family Court is extremely stressful. While judicial intervention can deliver much needed relief from family disputes, domestic violence or other family problems, the process often takes a toll on the parties involved. The nature of the issues, the level of scrutiny applied to families, and the contact between contentious parties all inevitably create tension. The court process is made even more difficult by stressors including long waits, confusing court procedures, childcare needs, hunger and thirst. The purpose of this report is to identify ways that New York City Family Court can better meet the needs of families who pass through the doors of its courthouses.

This report starts from the premise that courts can and should achieve justice not only through judicial decision-making, but also by creating environments in which all parties are treated with full respect and in which the best possible outcomes are facilitated. Family Courts strive to use conciliatory, child-focused, and family-friendly approaches in applying the law; it logically follows that their buildings and services should reflect these qualities. This report assesses certain aspects of the current level of service in the New York City Family Court and offers concrete suggestions for improvements. The recommendations are practical steps that could be implemented without legislation, major shifts in policy, or the construction of new facilities.

The researchers and authors of this report are law students and faculty in the Family Defense Clinic at New York University School of Law.¹⁷ At the request of the Committee on Family Court and Family Law of the Association of the Bar of the City of New York, we studied the Family Court as it existed in each borough between September 2004 and February 2005, followed by an update on the new Brooklyn Family Court courthouse in October 2005. The findings of this report build on a 2000 report¹⁸ by the Vera Institute for Justice, which made similar assessments with regard to the Manhattan Family Court courthouse. Many of the problems that the Vera Institute identified still exist in that courthouse and were identified in other boroughs' Family Court courthouses, as well.

The law student researchers made multiple visits to all of the Family Courts in each borough to identify services and investigate the user-friendliness of the buildings. They set out to evaluate systematically the ease with which they – as newcomers to Family Court – were able to find their way around Family Court buildings and to access information. At each courthouse, the students interviewed professionals who regularly interact with families, including court

¹⁷ The Family Defense Clinic, a clinical program of NYU School of Law, represents parents and other relatives of children who are in or at risk of foster care placement. The Clinic also studies child welfare policy and practice and undertakes projects designed to improve the experiences of families involved with the foster care and Family Court systems.

¹⁸ JULIA VITULLO-MARTIN & BRIAN MAXEY, NEW YORK FAMILY COURT: COURT USER PERSPECTIVES, available at http://www.vera.org/publication_pdf/nyfamilycourt.pdf.

officers, clerks, record room staff, childcare providers, and Legal Information for Families Today (“LIFT”)¹⁹ staff. The researchers asked these workers to describe the formal and informal systems at work in the courthouse, with an eye toward what works well or what needs improvement. Additionally, when the students were in the courthouses in connection with their own clinical cases, they took the opportunity to assess the quality of the courtroom experience, childcare services, and access to records.

In order to organize this discussion, we have identified four performance areas in which Family Courts may evaluate the quality of their service to court users.

1. Confidentiality
2. Access to Information
3. Accommodations
4. Childcare Services

Each section of this report discusses the significance of one performance area, prior research on the issue when available, and the findings of this study. Specific recommendations for improvement are made at the end of each section. To define the goals in each area, the Report draws on the *Trial Court Performance Standards and Measurement System*²⁰ drafted by the U.S. Department of Justice’s Bureau of Justice Assistance. Two of the Standards provide overarching goals that are relevant to all of the performance areas:

Standard 5.1: *The public perceives the trial court and the justice it delivers as accessible.*

Standard 5.2: *The public has trust and confidence that basic trial court functions are conducted expeditiously and fairly, and that court decisions have integrity.*

These goals inform this study and inspire the recommendations presented. Most suggestions we make for improvement should be possible without major structural changes in the courthouses. We identify internal systems and practices that could be modified to help patrons navigate the courts more effectively. Our findings indicate the benefit of well-spent resources, most notably in the recently built Queens and Brooklyn courthouses, which offer many features we applaud. Our focus, however, is on improvements that do not require substantial new resources. In order to make the most of existing resources, the report highlights the successes of the various courthouses as models the others might use. Each courthouse has developed its own methods to serve the needs of its constituents. The structure of services should vary to meet the individual challenges of each borough, but at the same time the Family Court can draw on lessons regarding effective approaches that have been learned in other boroughs. If adopted, these recommendations could significantly improve the experiences and day-to-day satisfaction of New York City’s Family Court users.

¹⁹ LIFT is a non-profit organization dedicated to addressing the complexities families face in the New York City Family Courts by providing information, support, and referrals to neighborhood-based services and free legal service organizations.

²⁰ BUREAU OF JUSTICE ASSISTANCE, OFFICE OF JUSTICE PROGRAMS, TRIAL COURT PERFORMANCE STANDARDS AND MEASUREMENT SYSTEM (1997), *available at* http://www.ncsconline.org/D_Research/tcps/index.html. Other States have drawn on these standards to develop state-specific standards. *See, e.g.*, BARBARA A. BABB & JEFFREY A. KUHN, PERFORMANCE STANDARDS AND MEASURES FOR MARYLAND’S FAMILY DIVISIONS (2001).

I. Confidentiality

(a) Background

The cases heard in Family Court involve the most personal of issues. Every day, judges are asked to decide custody disputes, separate or reunite parents and children, terminate parental rights, establish paternity, issue orders of protection, and require child support. Respecting the sensitive nature of such issues is a key aspect of the level of service a Family Court provides. This can be challenging for even the best-intentioned court staff who often have high caseloads and are routinely dealing with families in crisis.

It is essential that the litigants in these disputes be able to speak freely and therefore privately, about their cases. The ability of litigants to converse confidentially with their attorneys is, of course, fundamental to our legal system. Given the high caseloads of Family Court lawyers, it is often difficult for attorneys to meet with their clients prior to court appearances. Consequently, clients must be able to discuss their cases with their lawyers in each courthouse without fear of being overheard by adverse parties or the general public. Moreover, private conversations among family members or between litigants and social workers are often crucial to reaching the best possible outcome for each case.

(b) Findings

The more crowded and overwhelmed a courthouse, the harder it is to protect confidentiality. It is perhaps not surprising then that confidentiality is sometimes breached within New York City Family Court. We examined four aspects of Family Court practice that impact the right to confidentiality: 1) posting of confidential information; 2) availability of private conference areas; 3) notification to parties of their rights to confidentiality and privacy within the courtroom; and 4) interruption and disturbance of court proceedings by persons not associated with the pending case.

First, when personal information is posted and available to the general public confidentiality may be compromised. In the Manhattan and Bronx Family Court **courthouses**, the day's court calendars are posted outside court parts so that the central issue in each case is reported next to the names of the litigants. For example, "DNA test results" or "paternity" is listed for some cases. Anyone in court on that day can see what issue a specific person is there to address.

While posting the names of litigants may be justified by the assistance this provides them in locating their cases, there is no reason to reveal the nature of the cases. To the extent that Family Court cases are often voluntarily undertaken, such openness with private information may deter people from taking full advantage of the Family Court system. The Queens and Staten Island Courts have taken a simple step to mitigate this problem. In these courts, the calendars are folded so as to cover up the description of the issue to be addressed in each case. While this small step is a significant improvement, the concern could be further addressed by actually omitting the issues from the posted sheets.

The new Brooklyn and Queens courthouses employ a system that makes it easy for litigants to determine where their cases will be heard. Large monitors located throughout the courthouse scroll through a list of the cases scheduled for the day in alphabetical order by last names of the litigants involved. Next to a litigant's name are a docket

number and the Part where the matter is scheduled to be heard. Located in front of each Part is a small monitor listing the cases specific to that Part, which also displays litigants' names and docket numbers. This system effectively directs litigants where they need to go in the courthouse without publicly revealing more information than necessary. The older courthouses are making creative efforts to address the signage issue with initiatives to implement digital signs and to display other printed information in plastic frames.

Second, the availability of private spaces to speak in New York City Family Court varies widely by courthouse. While we appreciate that this issue presents a significant challenge in the older courthouses, where there is no currently unused space, we recommend that high priority be given to reallocating space in the older courthouses, when practicable, for lawyers to meet with their clients. In many of the courthouses, lawyers must meet with their clients in waiting areas, hallways, and stairwells because there are no private consultation rooms. Given that attorney-client discussions often involve serious personal issues and allegations, a litigant's ability to speak freely is at risk of being greatly hindered by concern about being overheard. The caseloads of most Family Court lawyers are large; often, it is impossible for lawyers to discuss important issues before the day of court appearances. Consequently, litigants need to be able to provide updates and respond to attorney inquiries in the courthouse. Courthouse design should therefore anticipate the need for confidential meeting space.

The need for quality confidential meeting space was addressed well in the new Queens courthouse and to some extent in the new Brooklyn courthouse. In Queens, for every two courtrooms, one room is available for conferences involving ACS attorneys and one room is available for conferences involving other attorneys. This availability of private, soundproof meeting space facilitates discussion about serious issues within the courthouse. The availability of these conference rooms right next to the courtrooms assures that conversations can be held in private without parties worrying about missing their cases being called.

The new Brooklyn courthouse has a similar design to the Queens courthouse. In Brooklyn, however, the conference rooms are generally locked, which greatly reduces their effectiveness. The court attorneys have discretion over the availability of the conference rooms because the primary purpose of the conference rooms is to accommodate conferencing done at the direction of the Court. Additionally, attorneys can ask the court attorney for permission to use a conference room. Some court attorneys appear to leave their conference rooms unlocked so that these rooms are accessible throughout the day when not in use for case conferences, but many do not. While it is appropriate for priority to be given to cases being conferenced with the court attorney or at the direction of the court, keeping the rooms locked and unused for large portions of the day is an inefficient use of limited resources. The rooms could be left open so that permission for their use need not be sought. Additionally, the policy that court attorneys have top priority to use the rooms could be posted.

In contrast, the Bronx and Manhattan courthouses do not offer adequate space for private conferencing. If renovation to address this is not possible in these two venues, Staten Island's Family Court courthouse provides an example of a reasonable solution; the construction of a soundproof conference "room" in the lobby between courtrooms. Even a single corner blocked off in each waiting area and soundproofed would represent a significant improvement to current conditions.

Each borough's Family Court also varies in its approach to confidentiality within the courtrooms. Family Court proceedings are officially open to the public, but judges may exclude individuals from the courtroom on a case-by-case basis.²¹ This important "open court" policy was adopted in order to ensure public accountability for what happens in the New York City Family Court. While the general rule is that members of the public may sit in on court proceedings, court users may request that the judge close the courtroom while their case is being heard (although the decision is ultimately left to the judge's discretion). Litigants are rarely made aware of this right. Each courthouse differs on the extent to which it informs court users of their rights to request that outsiders and the media be excluded. The Brooklyn and Staten Island courthouses have signs informing people of this right, and small but similar signs are available in the Bronx. Only in Brooklyn are such signs bilingual. These signs could be displayed more prominently.

Despite the "open court" policy, we found that it is often quite difficult for members of the public, including members of the media, to gain entrance to courtrooms. Signs on the doors of many courtrooms indicate that members of the public are not allowed to enter. People who enter and are not known to court staff are frequently asked to identify themselves and then asked to leave. Open access to Family Court is instrumental in ensuring a fair and just system. Any policies, behaviors or signs that are inconsistent with this purpose should be changed.

We also found troubling informal messages about respect for confidentiality that were conveyed during court proceedings. It appears rare that a judge or referee will notify litigants of the option to close the courtroom. Consequently, the culture of the courtroom is often the only indication to litigants of what protocols apply. Some judges require silence in the courtroom and only allow people to enter the courtroom with permission of a court officer. However, in many of the Family Court Parts lawyers must enter the courtroom because they are not sure when their cases are going to be called or because they want to pick up or drop off materials in anticipation of a case. This can be disruptive to the court proceedings, often interrupting the flow of testimony and creating noise that distracts participants and distorts the quality of the audio recordings. Such disruptions – which arise when the most personal of issues are being discussed – signal a lack of respect for the privacy of the individuals involved.

Open access to courtrooms is an important aspect of public accountability and should be vigorously protected. But the goals of the policy are not being served by the current practice. The people who are actually allowed inside courtrooms are lawyers who are typically there to determine when their cases will be called. If better systems were in place to track the calling of cases, lawyers would not find it necessary to enter courtrooms other than when their case is before the judge or hearing officer or to pick up and drop off documents.

In marked contrast, the Queens and Brooklyn Family Court courthouses had little disturbance in the courtrooms. They are fortunate in that they have ante rooms to each courtroom, where lawyers and court officers can discuss an upcoming case without disturbing

²¹ According to 22 NYCRR § 205.4: "(a) The Family Court is open to the public. Members of the public, including the news media, shall have access to all courtrooms, lobbies, public waiting areas and other common areas of the Family Court otherwise open to individuals having business before the court. (b) The general public or any person may be excluded from a courtroom only if the judge presiding in the courtroom determines, on a case-by-case basis based upon supporting evidence, that such exclusion is warranted in that case." In addition, Chief Judge Kaye issued an Administrative Order of the Chief Administrative Judge, effective as of September 1997, implementing the "open court" policy.

ongoing proceedings. The Queens courthouse also has desks outside each of the courtrooms where court officers can be stationed to monitor the proceedings of the individual courtrooms and provide information to litigants and attorneys concerned about matters such as when the next case will be called. The Brooklyn courthouse has two stations per floor that serve the same purpose.

If adequate staffing is not available to regularly allow court officers to be available outside of courtrooms, there are other options. A sign system could be devised so as to let parties know what case is being heard and which is next, so that attorneys would not need to open the courtroom doors to check. At the very least, standardized rules as to when entrance and exit are allowed should be established, clearly posted, and strictly enforced.

(c) Recommendations

1. **Omit references to the subject matter of individual cases in public postings.** Court staff should be sensitive to the privacy of litigants and case information should not be revealed unnecessarily.
2. **Ensure the availability of private, unlocked conference areas in close proximity to all courtrooms.** These areas should be clearly marked and a system of reservation should be developed and posted. If priority for certain rooms is given to cases being conferenced with a court attorney, that policy should be posted without limiting access to others when the rooms are not being used for that purpose.
3. **Ensure that court officers monitor the entrance to each courtroom.** It is far less disturbing to have one person going in and out of the courtroom than many. Also, have court officers help keep hallways clear and quiet.
4. **Develop a system of signage so that attorneys and parties know which case is being heard and which is next.** Posting regularly updated scheduling information could alleviate the need for attorneys to be present in the courtroom during cases in which they are not involved.
5. **Create and display multi-lingual signs explaining litigants' rights to request that the public and media be excluded from the courtroom.** Where appropriate, judges and hearing officers should also verbally inform litigants of the right to request a closed courtroom.
6. **Ensure that court officers and judges are fairly and consistently enforcing the "open courtroom" policy in a manner that comports with the goals of public accountability and respect for litigants.** Members of the public and media who wish to observe should be allowed to do so except where the required finding by a judge has been made.

II. Access to Information

(a) Background

In 2001, New York's Office of Justice Initiatives issued a report recommending that the New York court system adopt as a guiding principle the maxim that "Court employees should always strive to provide the maximum amount of information" to litigants and the general

public.²² As the report’s authors explained, “[p]roviding information about the courts and court procedures is the cornerstone of ensuring meaningful access to justice.”²³ In order to fulfill its “vital mission” of expanding and increasing access to New York’s courts, the court system bears the obligation of “ensuring that court users, whether represented or not, are knowledgeable consumers of court services.”²⁴

The Department of Justice’s *Trial Court Performance Standards and Measurement System* further encourages courts to ensure that the “costs of access to trial court proceedings and records – whether measured in terms of money, time, or the procedures that must be followed – are reasonable, fair, and affordable,” and that the “trial court informs the community about its programs.”²⁵

New York’s Unified Court System, moreover, takes as part of its mission the “obligation to arm the public with as much information as possible about the courts and court procedures.”²⁶ This section of the report offers an assessment of the New York Family Court’s progress toward achieving that goal.

(b) Findings

Between 1998 and 1999, the Vera Institute of Justice conducted a survey of over 600 users of Manhattan’s Family Court.²⁷ Most civilian users of the court system had at least one positive comment to make about their experience, yet the majority also had significant concerns about a lack of available information. Nearly half of civilian users said that they had difficulty finding their way around the court and, while court officers were described as extremely helpful in navigation, signage was frequently described as poor. As noted by the report’s authors, this is a problem “with substantive repercussions — cases are often dismissed, adjourned, or worse, held without the party when the party fails to show up on time.”²⁸ The Vera Institute’s study recommended a complete replacement of existing signs “with a comprehensive, logical, and aesthetically pleasing system of signs in English, Spanish, and possibly Russian and Cantonese.”²⁹ Furthermore, court users wished for an increase in the amount of information available and the designation of someone to answer questions when needed.

Unfortunately, our more recent findings indicate that these problems have not yet been adequately addressed. While we understand that improvements were made in response to the Vera Institute study, particularly the prohibition of paper signs and the introduction of digital signage, we found that signage in most of the boroughs continues to be insufficient and

²² FACILITATING ACCESS COMMITTEE, FINAL REPORT AND RECOMMENDATIONS, Appendix E, page 2, available at <http://www.courts.state.ny.us/ip/justiceinitiatives/pdfs/FACReport%20corrected%208-20.pdf>. The Office of Justice Initiatives, a program of the New York State Office of Court Administration, works to provide assistance to pro se litigants, to stimulate pro bono and legal services for New York’s poor households and to educate the public about the courts.

²³ *Id.* at 3.

²⁴ *Id.* at 1.

²⁵ See BUREAU OF JUSTICE ASSISTANCE, *supra* note 2, Standards 1.5, 4.4.

²⁶ FACILITATING ACCESS COMMITTEE, *supra* note 4, at Appendix D.

²⁷ VITULLO-MARTIN & MAXEY, *supra* note 1 at 4.

²⁸ *Id.* at 8.

²⁹ *Id.* at 20.

confusing. This is especially troubling given that some court users are of low literacy. Only the courthouses in Queens and Brooklyn contain clear and organized signs, directories, and maps. The Bronx courthouse suffers from a lack of signs and, despite the presence of some Spanish postings, an overall weakness in information for non-English speakers. Staten Island and Manhattan have the opposite problem, with a surplus of signs that are visually distracting and sometimes contradictory. Staten Island, for example, has seven different signs for the record room in one waiting area. These signs are of varying fonts and styles, and none of them provides clear directions or serves a purpose in such a small area. Staten Island also posts signs informing parties how to read the docket schedule, but the “how to” sign does not correspond to the schedule format posted. The main entrance signs and many floor signs in Manhattan consist of lighted displays that scroll sequentially through directory information. While high-tech, these lighted signs are confusing and slow. Further, while the signs in the new Brooklyn Courthouse are clear in English, Spanish and Braille, they could easily be modified with little expense to include other common languages, spoken in Brooklyn, such as Russian.

With the exception of the Queens Family Court, there is not an adequately staffed and clearly designated information desk at any of the Family Court courthouses in New York City, although we understand that there are plans to improve staffing so as to allow for personnel to be stationed at information desks in the other courthouses. The Brooklyn Family Court has security stations on every floor and near the entrance of the building, but does not have any sign indicating that they serve as information tables. The Bronx Family Court has an information desk, but it is not used nearly as much as the one in Queens. This may be due to its location and signage and to the fact, discussed below, that court officers provide information during security screening at the Bronx Family Court entrance. We have been advised, however, that the planned expansion of the Bronx Family Court comprehends our recommendations regarding improving litigants’ access to information.

As the Vera Institute’s survey confirmed, there is an informal pattern of court officers and other court employees serving as the primary sources of information for court users. Our observations suggest that this informational role was inconsistently fulfilled and somewhat problematic. When people go through security in the Bronx and Staten Island courthouses, for example, court officers ask them where they need to go in the building, both for the purpose of screening and to provide information. Due to heavy traffic in the Bronx, this dual-purpose functioning unavoidably leads to congestion and to extensive lines at the security desk. In Manhattan and Brooklyn, court officers do not regularly ask court users during the security screening where they are headed. Consequently, in those courthouses, people approach court officers wherever they find them in order to ask questions about where to go in the building for different services. Sometimes the entrance to each floor has a court officer available to answer questions, but they are rarely clearly identified as an information resource.

Other employees are frequently called upon to serve as information resources, as well. For example, in Staten Island, people with questions about filing petitions and other case-related issues are referred to the Record Room, where the staff seems prepared to handle such questions. While the Staten Island system seems to be well organized, there is one element that could use improvement. The Record Room information counter is also the door (a Dutch door) to the Record Room, so people’s conversations with staff are constantly interrupted by traffic going through the door. The disruptive nature of these interactions adds to a general sense of chaos in the main lobby of the Staten Island courthouse, which could be lessened by giving numbers and calling people in to the Record Room to be helped at a desk rather than at the Dutch door. In

other courthouses people are also frequently referred to the Record Rooms, often for basic information such as their Part number. This could be provided by court officers or by clearer posting of court calendars. The new Brooklyn courthouse monitors, which provide scrolling information on the day's cases, is one example of how to cut down on litigants' needs to rely on the Record Rooms, where the wait-time for service is often lengthy.

Staff in all of the childcare centers in the courthouses reported that they often provide information regarding common Family Court matters such as obtaining child support and orders of protection. While it is admirable that they try to be helpful, the childcare centers do not have staff trained for this purpose and they interact only with the fraction of court users who bring children to their facilities.

All of the courthouses also have tables staffed by LIFT, a non-profit organization dedicated to providing information to court users. LIFT provides a great deal of valuable information at tables near each courthouse entrance. LIFT cannot, however, meet all the information needs of Family Court users. LIFT tables are not available at all times during which the court is open and in one borough, Staten Island, LIFT no longer provides service. In Brooklyn, LIFT staff is present full-time Monday through Thursday, but only until 1:00 pm on Fridays. In Manhattan, the Bronx, and Queens, LIFT staff is present only during the morning session, from 8:45 am until 1:00 pm. Even if LIFT services were available full-time in every courthouse, the Courts themselves have an obligation to provide basic information regarding court services and procedures.

A model for improvement exists in the Queens courthouse, where designated court officers staff clearly designated information tables near the main entranceway and next to courtrooms. Our observers noted a constant stream of patrons asking questions at the central information table who were then directed to the appropriate room or referred to the adjacent LIFT table to receive further resources. There are also two separate counters for filing different types of petitions, with staff to assist with the paperwork, counter space for writing, and an orderly line. This division of labor among court officers, with some dedicated to providing information, means that officers at the entrance do not have to slow entry of other court users to answer questions. Consequently, the entrances remain clear and fewer people are seen wandering in confusion.

Finally, there is the issue of access to case records. Litigants have a fundamental right to access their own case records. Not only do they have a right to be provided with their case records upon request, but they also have a right to sign a release so that another person, such as an attorney, may access the case records. With rare exceptions, litigants are entitled to the entire record of their case and the contents of the records may not be restricted. It is imperative that litigants have access to their own records so that they can understand the proceedings, prepare for their cases, and follow and enforce court orders.

Our study indicates that difficulties in accessing and copying records are frequent. Record rooms vary greatly from courthouse to courthouse in terms of the ease of accessing records, copier availability, and costs. Copiers are often broken without alternatives available, and court employees have reported that there is no clear procedure for reporting and repairing non-functional machines. Additionally, change machines are conspicuously absent. The cost of copying records, at 15 cents per page, can add up quickly. Given that many parties to Family Court proceedings live in poverty, a system for subsidizing access to vital court records or, as in Staten Island, providing them free of charge, would help ensure that court users are able to retrieve the documents they need to participate fully in their cases.

Simply gaining full access to one's court file can prove prohibitively difficult. In Manhattan, for example, litigants are sometimes not allowed to copy the court endorsement sheets. This is problematic because the endorsement sheets are often the only written record of the court proceedings and sometimes the only written record of court orders. Across courthouses, the request procedures for records differ greatly, with some requiring more personal identification and paperwork than others. In the Bronx, there appears to be no established procedure for requesting records and there is marked resistance to allowing litigants and lawyers access to files. In Queens and Staten Island, there are forms people fill out to request records and the identification required to access records is more clearly explained. Records for cases involving voluntary placements in foster care are sometimes located in a separate record area (though there is no notice of this in the main records rooms) and access to these records seems more restricted. There is no apparent reason that litigants in different courthouses or with different types of cases should be subject to different rules in accessing their own files.

(c) Recommendations

1. **Streamline and translate existing signs.** We strongly reaffirm the recommendation made in 2000 by the Vera Institute of Justice that in all boroughs, the existing signs should be replaced with a “comprehensive, logical, and aesthetically pleasing system of signs in English, Spanish, and possibly Russian and Cantonese.”³⁰ All signs should be designed and located to be as clear as possible to court users of limited literacy.
2. **Create an information desk near the entrance to each courthouse and designate a court employee to be available during all court hours to answer questions and direct traffic.** Coordinate the services provided at the information desks with LIFT, so that all of the information needs of patrons are met.
3. **Post the litigants' names with Part numbers and the locations of the Parts (but not the subject matter of cases) in a central area by the main entrance of each courthouse so that court users can find their courtrooms.** An alternative might be to have the list available at the information desk by the entrance.
4. **Ensure ability of litigants to copy court documents.** Record rooms should provide a copy of court documents to litigants free of charge. If resources are not available for this, it is vital that there be change machines next to all copiers and that these change machines be regularly serviced, as in the case of the Brooklyn Family Court. We urge record room administrators to establish a clear procedure for reporting and repairing non-functional machines, including both copiers and change machines. Designating a second copier in each courthouse to be available as a back-up for public use is also recommended.
5. **Post the procedures for requesting records.** Procedures and identification requirements for requesting records should be posted clearly so that court users may obtain prompt access to court documents through consistent procedures.

³⁰ VITULLO-MARTIN & MAXEY, *supra* note 1, at 20.

III. Accommodations

(a) Background

Accommodations and physical surroundings are crucial to creating an atmosphere of respect and cooperation in Family Court. In this section, we discuss both provision of basic services to meet the needs of court patrons and upkeep of the physical environment. From our interviews with court officers, we learned that the organization of space in a courthouse can significantly affect the incidence of altercations arising. By informal report, when the Queens Family Court relocated to its more spacious new building, a 30% decline in the rate of courthouse violence was noted. Informal reports regarding the new Brooklyn courthouse indicate that the new environment there has also led to greater calm and fewer incidents. There are many factors that help explain this phenomenon, including allocation of more space (eliminating overcrowding), minimizing the sense of chaos through organized systems of information and crowd control, and providing comfortable and aesthetically pleasing surroundings.

Studies have shown that ill-maintained facilities communicate a lack of respect for court users, which is particularly problematic when most users of a court are members of minority groups, as is the case in New York Family Court.³¹ Providing basic amenities, such as clean restrooms, sends a message of respect to litigants and is essential to creating a constructive atmosphere.

The Department of Justice's *Trial Court Performance Standards and Measurement System* sets out two standards for reasonable convenience and accommodation in courts: 1) "*Trial court facilities are safe, accessible, and convenient to use;*" and 2) "*The trial court gives all who appear before it the opportunity to participate effectively, without undue hardship or inconvenience.*"³² These standards are relevant to the general layout and upkeep of courthouses, as well as to accommodations for participants with language barriers, mental impairments, and physical handicaps.

(b) Findings

Basic accommodations are particularly important in Family Courts because many litigants must remain at the courthouse all day before being seen by a judge or hearing officer. Unfortunately, otherwise commonplace amenities are often lacking in New York City's Family Court. The absence of even seemingly minor items (e.g., working water coolers, pay phones and bathroom mirrors) can make a significant difference in court users' experience of Family Court, in terms of both personal comfort and preparedness for court appearances.

From the moment of entry into Family Court buildings, basic conveniences are lacking and court users often receive the inadvertent message that their time is unimportant to the Court administration. In the Bronx visitors must wait in line for up to an hour to enter the courthouse, sometimes waiting outside in harsh weather, while attorneys and court employees are allowed through security immediately. Although appropriate security screening does take time, there may be other factors contributing to the length of lines for court visitors. As discussed in Section

³¹ FRANKLIN H. WILLIAMS JUDICIAL COMMISSION ON MINORITIES, *EQUAL JUSTICE: A WORK IN PROGRESS* (1997).

³² See BUREAU OF JUSTICE ASSISTANCE, *supra* note 2, Standards 1.2, 1.3.

If above, the officers who are doing security screening also often serve an informational function, taking time to explain to patrons where to go in the building, how to file certain petitions, and providing other legal information. These functions could be separated between the security station and an information desk. Examining traffic flow and the distribution of informational duties could make crowd control more efficient and manageable.

Once patrons make it through security lines, additional long waits for cases to be called are extremely common in Family Court. The Vera Institute study found that the majority of Manhattan Family Court users had complaints about the long wait time before their court appearances.³³ Users commonly waited two to three hours before seeing a judge or hearing officer and sometimes up to six or seven hours.³⁴ Shortening these extreme wait times is an important goal — one that deserves serious attention, but is beyond the scope of this report. There are, however, several steps that could be taken to ease the distress court users experience while they are waiting.

The lack of available food and drink options, for example, creates unnecessary discomfort. Of the five courthouses, only the Manhattan Family Court **courthouse** (which has Snapple machines) offers the public a way to obtain beverages other than water fountains. Even water fountains are not consistently functional, and no cups are provided to prevent the spread of germs. When litigants are expected to spend long hours waiting patiently to be heard by the court, without leaving the building or bringing in outside food, and often with children in tow, the availability of reasonably priced snacks and beverages is an absolute necessity. While it is true that roaches and other pests are a problem in some of the courthouses — an issue that needs to be addressed in any event — regular extermination services and designating eating areas on each floor could minimize the risk of attracting vermin.

Telephone access is another basic convenience that can be vital and is often lacking in Family Court. Working pay phones are difficult to find in the court buildings; often, the phones are broken or there are gaping holes where phones once hung. While the prevalence of cell phones may lessen the need for pay phones, it does not entirely eliminate the necessity. Many court users cannot afford cell phones. Even those who own cell phones are often without them in Family Court because phones with cameras in them are usually confiscated by security in all the boroughs except Manhattan.

The inability to make calls goes beyond inconvenience: it can be a serious detriment to litigants who may need to locate their attorneys, gather information relevant to their cases, communicate with their childcare providers, employers, and so forth. If the rationale for excluding phones with cameras from the courthouses stems from security or privacy concerns, it is difficult to understand why a similar procedure is not present in all boroughs. Perhaps the concerns could be addressed simply by monitoring unauthorized picture taking rather than by restricting court users' phone access.

The quality of space in the courtrooms also presents concerns. Some courtrooms, particularly those of referees and hearing officers, are shockingly cramped and cluttered. This was most common in the Bronx. Routinely, there are more participants present for a case than can reasonably fit in the courtroom, causing disruption and creating additional tension during court appearances. Simply removing large filing cabinets from crowded courtrooms and restricting the presence of attorneys not participating in the pending case would go a long way toward easing overcrowding.

³³ VITULLO-MARTIN & MAXEY, *supra* note 1, at 10.

³⁴ *Id.* at 11.

Even in the new Brooklyn courthouse the courtrooms were not designed with adequate tables for the multiple parties that participate in child protective and custody cases. As a result, both parents, their respective attorneys, the law guardian, and sometimes additional participants (such as other relatives) are crammed onto one side of the courtroom. Providing one or two additional tables for these multiple parties would solve this problem. Moreover, the Brooklyn courthouse, while much better than its predecessor, is plagued with very poor quality microphones at each table, which requires the judge to frequently interrupt the proceedings in order to request that parties speak directly into the microphone. This problem limits movement, adds to stress for those speaking, and takes additional time.

In addition, because the Family Court serves so many families with small children, the accommodations should be more child friendly than is currently the case. Making sure that bathrooms have changing tables, that electrical outlets have child-protective covers, and that areas under construction do not pose safety hazards are particularly important.

There are also basic sanitary concerns that need attention in most of the Family Court courthouses. Often there are inadequate supplies of toilet paper, soap and paper towels in the bathrooms. Roach problems have been repeatedly reported in some courthouses. And it is common for walls, floors and seating areas to be noticeably dirty. If finances drive these conditions, we urge an increased allocation of funds for custodial and pest control services. We also urge the development of a clear reporting and monitoring system to identify maintenance and supply needs (especially in the bathrooms).

Finally, while decoration could be seen as a more minor concern, dingy surroundings do make the courthouses more alienating. Some of the courthouses would benefit greatly simply from a new coat of paint. Children's artwork could be used to improve the walls of each Family Court. The mosaic mural of families over the entrance of the Bronx Family Court is a beautiful example of what can be done to improve Family Court space. On a smaller scale, schools could be invited to sponsor murals in public areas and inexpensive frames could be filled with the work of children waiting in the Courts' Children's Centers.

Although we appreciate that the landlord/tenant relationship between New York City and the Family Court constrains the Court in its ability to provide and maintain amenities such as those itemized above, we believe that our observations highlight the need for creating a system within each courthouse for monitoring and reporting to the appropriate person in the City administration such things as non-working telephones and beverage machines, the need for restroom janitorial and repair services and the need for pest control services.

(c) Recommendations

1. **Ensure adequate hygiene provisions.** We urge each courthouse to maintain functioning water coolers with cups, bathroom faucets, hand dryers/paper towel dispensers, soap dispensers, bathroom mirrors, diaper changing stations, and adequate supplies of toilet paper. We also urge each courthouse to develop a systematic procedure to monitor the provision of needed supplies and to post signs telling court users how to report problems.
2. **Provide public telephones and cease confiscating cell phones.** Pay phones should be re-installed where they have been removed and should be kept in working order. Signs should be posted instructing court users how to report problems with pay phones. Court users should be allowed to keep their phones with them.

3. **Ensure adequate space and technology in courtrooms.** Steps should be taken to ease overcrowding in smaller courtrooms, including removing file cabinets and excluding attorneys who are not participating in the pending case. The new Brooklyn Family Court would greatly benefit from the addition of functioning microphones and sufficient table space for all participants.
4. **Supply food and beverage options for patrons.** Given long waiting periods, denying court patrons access to food and drink is unacceptable. Designating food areas could minimize concerns about cleanliness.
5. **Maximize efficiency of traffic flow.** In order to keep traffic moving and ensure that crowding does not increase tension in the courthouses, Courts should allocate responsibilities between security and information officers so that congestion is reduced.
6. **Maintain clean facilities.** Floors, walls, chairs, stairwells and bathrooms are all in need of improved janitorial services. Further funding should be dedicated to maintaining clean courthouse facilities. A reporting system should be developed for identifying and remedying unsanitary conditions.
7. **Where possible, use children's artwork to decorate the courthouses.** School-sponsored murals or inexpensively framed drawings could significantly brighten the courthouses. Additionally, repainting could improve some waiting areas.
8. **Create a system for monitoring and reporting building maintenance issues to an appropriate New York City administrative liaison.** Improved communication between the court and the appropriate City oversight agency would facilitate a more hospitable environment for families and children. Formal avenues of communication established and regularized at both higher and lower levels, such as regular communication between the Supervising Judges and a comparable level city administrative staff person, would ensure that needed repairs and services are addressed in a timely fashion.

IV. Childcare Services

(a) Background

Because the majority of cases involve children, it is essential that the Family Court provide childcare services. Statewide, the Unified Court System's childcare centers serve over 50,000 children per year and hundreds of children make use of the centers each day.³⁵ We have identified three main goals for Family Court childcare services: 1) convenience; 2) safety; and 3) referrals to community services for families in need.

The improvement of childcare services in Family Court over the last several years is highly commendable. Given the high costs of childcare, the provision of free services is a necessity for some parents, and a great convenience for many others. This is particularly true because parents must often arrive at the courthouse without knowing what time their case will be completed.

³⁵ NEW YORK STATE PERMANENT JUDICIAL COMMISSION ON JUSTICE FOR CHILDREN, SECOND INTERIM REPORT TO THE COURT OF APPEALS ON THE NEW YORK STATE COURT IMPROVEMENT PROJECT (2001), available at <http://www.courts.state.ny.us/ip/justiceforchildren/publications.shtml>.

Safety is another critical purpose of providing childcare, especially for situations involving domestic violence and in contentious custody disputes. Some cases involve an abusive partner who could traumatize a child or abscond with a child if proper protections are not ensured.

Often Family Court cases are sources of significant distress to the children involved, many of whom have major service needs. Consequently, the childcare provided should be emotionally sensitive and considerate of any special needs of the children served. Additionally, childcare centers in Family Court provide an excellent opportunity to offer a wide array of citywide resources to children and families in need.

(b) Findings

Each Family Court has a Safe Horizon children's center, which operates under the auspices of the Permanent Judicial Commission on Justice for Children. This service is already one of the most valuable provided by the New York Family Court; yet improvements are possible. Because young children are generally not allowed in the individual courtrooms, parents who bring their children to court must often leave them at the children's centers while their cases are heard. The centers are open during both the morning and the afternoon sessions, with a break for lunch. When cases run into lunch or past the afternoon session, staff from the children's centers stay with the children until the parent's case has been completed for the day. All the children's centers have snacks available at 11:00 am and at 3:00 pm. When cases run into the lunch period, most centers say that they serve the children extra snacks for lunch. Not all childcare centers are equally easy to find, however, and the signage in most courthouses could be improved. The recently opened Brooklyn courthouse offers a good model in this regard. The children's center is conveniently located on the first floor adjacent to the elevator bank. Everyone entering the building must pass by two signs identifying the children's center, one of which is in English and the other in both English and Spanish.

When parents drop their children off at the children's centers, they are required to fill out lengthy paperwork, some of which documents contact information and special needs, and some of which attempts to determine what additional services the family might need. Once in the centers, children have room to play and occupy themselves without being crowded or subjected to the stresses of the waiting areas. The centers vary in terms of their requirements for parents checking back with their children.

In some courthouses, parents can drop off their children when they arrive at court; however, in others, parents are told to keep their children with them until just before their cases are called, due to a lack of space to accommodate all of the children at once. When a children's center fills, children must wait with their parents in the court waiting areas. When a case is called, parents must rush to the children's center and do the paperwork to register their children, then race back upstairs so their case may be heard. Expanding the facilities at the children's centers and increasing their resources so that they could accommodate more children would greatly reduce the stress felt by families. If that is not possible, the situation could be improved by streamlining the registration procedures and informing parents when their case is next in line to be called so they can drop the children off in advance.

Lunch break times and food options are dealt with differently by each courthouse. In the Manhattan Family Court, referrals are made when necessary to a free lunch program at a nearby mission. This arrangement is aimed to provide meals and a safe lunch location for parents and

children at risk of coming into contact with an abuser during breaks. The other children's centers close at lunch and offer no options for lunch in a protected environment. Given that the same safety concerns that exist the rest of the day for victims of domestic violence are still present, the closing of the children's centers during lunch may pose some risks. Unfortunately, the other "safe space" in the courthouses – the Safe Horizon offices where victims of domestic violence can wait – are also closed during the lunch break. Our interviews with children's center staff did indicate sensitivity to this issue, but it is unclear how it is addressed.

A wide array of other services are available through the children's centers. In all centers, parents can get baby food and diapers from the citywide Baby Buggy program. In the Manhattan center, children's clothing is also available to parents. Additionally, most children's centers have bulletin boards with listings for community food pantries, healthcare programs, support groups, and domestic violence services. The Manhattan Family Court is unique in its connection with a neighborhood mission that provides free lunches to parents and their children if their court case has been on that day. No such relationship with a community group exists at the other courthouses, but such collaboration would be recommended.

On a final note, we would like to bring attention to the fear shared by many parents that their children will be taken from their custody while at the children's centers. The Family Court represents a threat to some parents and, in fact, many children have been taken into the custody of Children's Services from children's centers. We urge children's center staff to be sensitive to parents' concern about this issue when they drop their children off at the centers.

(c) Recommendations

- 1. Ensure that adequate childcare is provided to accommodate the number of families expected and to allow parents to drop their children off before their cases are called.** Small children should not be required to remain all day in bare waiting rooms without snacks or activities, and parents should not have to rush to drop off their children at a children's center in the minutes right before their cases are called. Accordingly, the capacity of the children's centers should be expanded. Registration procedures should be streamlined, and if adequate space for all children is not available, court officers in the Parts should provide parents advance notice of when their cases will be called so that they can drop off children without delaying their cases being heard.
- 2. Encourage relationships with community organizations which can provide needed social services.** Citywide donations through Baby Buggy and Manhattan Family Court's relationship with a local mission are excellent examples of court- community partnerships that benefit litigants' children. Similar efforts should be developed and encouraged wherever possible.
- 3. Keep the children's center or a Safe Horizon office open in each courthouse during the lunch hour.** The domestic violence concerns that gave rise to these on-site "safe spaces" for children and victims of domestic violence are still present during lunch hours. It is vital that protected space for families be provided throughout the day.
- 4. Create a system for regularized communication between the court and a designated person from the Permanent Judicial Commission on Justice for Children for the purpose of addressing operational issues in the Children's Centers.**

Conclusion

Each of the five borough Family Courts has achieved different successes in making high-quality services accessible and creating a respectful environment for litigants. In particular, the new Queens and Brooklyn courthouses present models for many aspects of effective operation and facility design. There are numerous ways that current courthouse procedures and facilities can be improved without major renovation. This report's recommendations on confidentiality, access to information, physical environment, and childcare services are intended to provide practical, relatively simple steps to improve the level of service Family Court provides. Implementing these recommendations could have a substantial positive impact on the families that enter New York City Family Court, improving court users' experiences and facilitating the best possible case outcomes.