

Legal Aid of Manasota, Inc.
Legal Lifeline For Youth

For 33 years, Legal Aid of Manasota (LAMS), has fulfilled its mission of providing free civil legal aid to thousands of low-income residents in Manatee and Sarasota Counties. For almost four years, LAMS has been the only local agency providing sustained and intense legal advocacy for foster children and youth aging out of foster care through its Legal Lifeline for Youth Project, handling over 100 cases with one children's attorney. This **Legal Lifeline For Youth** initiative will expand their program by funding a second children's attorney to assist children in foster care at every stage of the legal proceedings. The total initiative budget of \$109,000 will fund salary, benefits, training, and other direct operating expenses for this attorney for 18 months.

Over 1,400 children in Manatee and Sarasota Counties need foster care services. Additionally, approximately 600 children age out of foster care yearly in the 12th Judicial Circuit and need a Transition Plan before entering Independent Living Court. Judges appoint LAMS' children's attorney to provide legal help to pending cases. But the caseload far exceeds one attorney's capacity.

With a second children's attorney, LAMS will give 50 more foster children and children aging out of foster care overall protection and expansion of their rights. Like the current attorney, the second will keep children informed, give them a voice, help them understand their options, coordinate with community agencies, and ensure their needs are being met. The added capacity will permit more personally tailored service plans, increases in visitation and parenting time if appropriate, and expedited permanency where applicable. Reduction of time children are in long-term care, at \$150 to \$200 a day, will lead to state cost savings. Foster youth in legal trouble will be represented in Crossover Court, with the intention to keep them out of the Juvenile Justice System. As children age out of the foster care system, they will have an effective Transition Plan, paving the way for their safe and successful futures.

Data collected in LAMS' Legal Server case management system will track how each child has been protected, specifying the areas of success for each individual, including safety, housing, education, mental health counseling, and health care.

To sustain this expansion, LAMS' annual fundraising appeal is being redirected to "Children's Legal Issues," incorporating the case data to illustrate its success. In addition, LAMS will identify funding from local and state granting organizations, the Florida Bar Foundation and other legal service funding opportunities.

The Legal Lifeline for Youth initiative will provide much needed assistance to high-risk youth at pivotal times in their lives. With Legal Lifeline assistance, the trajectory of the lives of youth in crises will be measurably, positively changed.