

TESSA's Project LIFT Celebrates the Success of the 100th PPO Attorney Representation in Domestic Violence, Sex Assault, & Stalking Cases



On December 16, 2016, a victim who was at great risk of being killed—and whose abuser had already killed the family dog and strangled her—tried unsuccessfully to represent herself in court and could not obtain a protective order.

Ten months later, in August 2017, TESSA launched Project LIFT, a new legal services program that provides representation to victims of domestic and sexual violence who are seeking permanent protection orders. Though only months old, the program has already produced tremendous success.

TESSA was founded in 1977 and is the only organization in the Pike Peak region whose mission is to serve victims of domestic violence, sex assault, and stalking cases. TESSA's mission is two-fold. TESSA not only provides confidential services to 10,000 victims each year, but also holds the vision to build a community without domestic and sexual violence. TESSA offers 24-hour crisis line, a Safehouse shelter that is the second-largest in the state, a victim's advocacy program, a children's program, counseling and group support, housing assistance and rural offices in Divide, Cripple Creek, Calhan—and now Project LIFT.

Project LIFT essentially connects victims with private attorneys in the community who TESSA compensates for their services. To date, TESSA has contracted with

approximately 20 contract attorneys in El Paso and Teller Counties. These attorneys provide limited scope representation for a flat fee. This representation is limited only to the protection order hearing itself.

In 2016, TESSA surveyed victims seeking services and asked them what they needed most. Victims were given a list of approximately 25 services—many of which TESSA offered and some that TESSA did not. Clients told us that legal services was one of their greatest needs. Soon after, TESSA prioritized creating a legal services program.

Only months later, the Office for Victims Programs announced the creation of two new pilot projects in Colorado as a result of their own statewide research. The Office for Victims Programs administers the federal Victims of Crime Act funding. One of those pilot funding projects was focused on creating new legal service programs for domestic violence victims. Project LIFT applied and was selected as one of the four pilot projects throughout the state modeled after the successful Project Safeguard in the Denver metro area.

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The attorneys TESSA has contracted with are family law practitioners, criminal law attorneys, immigration attorneys, general civil practice attorneys and juvenile attorneys. They range widely in age and experience within El Paso and Teller County. However, one thing is for certain. They reflect a strong commitment on the part of this community of lawyers to provide representation to clients.

Most of Project LIFT's clients are women whose abuse includes financial deprivation, so many could not otherwise afford an attorney. Some of them have suffered from domestic abuse at the hands of spouses for decades, while others are teenagers or young adults who have been sexually assaulted. The faces of domestic violence, sex assault, and stalking, are different. Many of these cases have related criminal, allocation of parental rights, immigration, or dissolution matters. Previously many of these clients attempted to represent themselves in a system that can be intimidating and confusing, and frequently had to face an abuser who could afford to hire counsel. And for those reasons, others simply did not try.

Project LIFT has been remarkably successful in increasing the number of positive outcomes in PPO hearings. Feedback from clients indicate that, thanks to Project LIFT attorneys, they feel safer and are more likely to try to obtain a permanent protection order.

Originally, TESSA expected to serve approximately 125 clients over the course of the 20-month grant.

Due to the increased confidence victims have with legal representation, 125 victims were assigned attorneys after only five months. At the time of writing this article, TESSA is seeking additional funding for the remainder of the grant period to more than double the number of victims served during the grant period. As now the largest of the four pilot projects, and in a community with the highest domestic violence and sex assault rates in the state, Project LIFT is making a meaningful impact on victim's lives—and in some cases, may be saving lives.

Many thanks to our contract attorneys, to the larger Bar, and to the judicial community who has participated and partnered with TESSA in the success of this project. Beyond serving individual clients, Project LIFT also proves that creative approaches can incentivize attorneys to engage in work that can and does improve access to justice for all. For more information regarding Project LIFT please contact Shelly Dill at sdill@tessacs.org.



Shelly Dill is the Managing Attorney of Project LIFT at TESSA. TESSA is a non-profit organization serving El Paso and Teller county victims of intimate partner domestic violence, sex assault, and stalking.