

E-SJI News

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STRATEGIC INITIATIVES GRANTS: IMPACT OF IMMIGRATION ON THE STATE COURTS

SJI's new Strategic Initiatives Grants (SIG) program is enabling SJI to address national court issues as they occur, and develop solutions to those problems. For example, recent immigration growth is having a significant impact on state and local courts. Courts along the Southwest Border and other areas of the United States with large immigrant populations are contending with issues such as how to provide culturally appropriate services; increase in gang-crime cases involving immigrants; and the impact of federal and state immigration policies on court operations. For FY 2008, SJI is using the SIG program to address immigration issues in the courts at a national impact level.

On March 27-28, 2008, SJI kicked off the SIG program by holding a roundtable discussion consisting of court administrators (including a state court administrator), state court judges, the National Center for State Courts (NCSC), and representatives from the Department of Justice's Bureau of Justice Assistance and Board of Immigration Appeals, to discuss the issues state courts are facing as a direct result of immigration. The group identified many issues, including a large increase in the need for court interpreters, concerns for equal access to justice for all, and determining how state and federal laws impact both legal and illegal immigrants. For example, the group discussed at length how state and

local sentencing practices can cause an immigrant to be placed in a deportable status under federal law. These types of dilemmas clearly demonstrate the need for state court judges and court personnel to be educated on federal immigration laws.

The meeting started with a brief outline on the relationship between state and federal immigration laws; then NCSC gave the results of a recent survey among judges which identified the key issues they are facing. Afterwards, the roundtable participants held discussions on how immigration is impacting their jurisdictions, and reported on some of the solutions that could address these problems. The meeting concluded with the group identifying key methods for SJI to provide assistance through the SIG program. A report on the group's activities, including their key recommendations, will be presented to the Board of Directors for their final decisions during the April 18, 2008, Board meeting. Once the Board decides on the next steps, SJI will begin rapidly implementing the programs and projects chosen.

SJI is very excited about this new effort, and will provide updates in future editions of the E-SJI News and other forums.

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SJI ROLLS OUT THE NEW SJI.GOV WEBSITE

On March 19, 2008, the General Services Administration (GSA) approved SJI's application for a .gov domain name for the SJI website. The new domain name is part of SJI's ongoing efforts to better communicate its federally-funded mission. The new website can be found at: www.sji.gov. Repeat users of SJI's website are encouraged to bookmark this new URL. The www.statejustice.org website is still owned by SJI; however, any user who visits that website will automatically be redirected to www.sji.gov.

The [sji.gov](http://www.sji.gov) website contains the same information as before, including the latest news, information on grants, and important forms for both grant applicants and current grantees. SJI appreciates the positive feedback it has received so far on its website, and looks forward to adding more useful content.

In addition to the website, all SJI staff email addresses have also changed to the .gov domain name. SJI has set up a forwarding function from the old email addresses, so emails to the .org email addresses will automatically be forwarded to the new .gov email address. A complete list of the new emails can be found on page 4 of this month's E-SJI News.

PROJECT BUDGETS AND THE 5 PERCENT RULE

The project budgets submitted with grant applications are examined closely during the staff review and Board approval processes. For applicants who are awarded SJI grants, this means the quarterly Financial Status Reports (SJI Form F) must reflect both the approved SJI and cash match budgets. SJI recently revised the Form F to include columns for both SJI and cash match budgets, and it is now available on the SJI website: <http://sji.gov/forms.php>. Current grantees are encouraged to use this revised Form F for future reporting.

Project budgets are subject to the "5 Percent Rule," which means that grantees can disburse between approved SJI budget line items up to 5 percent of the total amount awarded. For example, a total of \$10,000 may be moved from one line item to another without requesting a budget adjustment for a grant with a SJI budget of \$200,000. However, the grantee may not disburse funds in a line item category that was not approved in the original SJI budget. Using the \$200,000 example, if the original SJI budget did not have any funds for the purchase of equipment, the grantee may not move \$5,000 into the equipment line; even though it is within the 5 percent threshold. In this case, a budget adjustment (including a detailed explanation for why these changes are needed) must be requested in writing to SJI prior to making any budget modifications. However, the grantee is permitted to move \$5,000 from an approved line item or cumulatively into several line item categories, should the project activities require these adjustments.

Grantees are also strongly encouraged to monitor line item disbursements for their cash match budgets. It is important that grantees make every attempt to disburse cash match funds at the same rate as SJI funds. Low "burn" rates for cash match funds may force SJI to hold reimbursement requests until there is parity in cash match disbursements, unless the grantee has provided sufficient justification for the discrepancy in disbursement rates.

If grantees have questions about project budgets, they should contact SJI staff to discuss.

ALLEGHENY COUNTY, PENNSYLVANIA OVERHAULS PRETRIAL SERVICES PROGRAM



In FY 2006, with support from SJI, the Allegheny County, Pennsylvania, Court of Common Pleas contracted with the Pretrial Justice Institute (PJI) to address severe problems in the pretrial services program (SJI-06-N-129). PJI provided on-going technical assistance over a period of one year, working with court staff to completely overhaul the program. The changes included:

- Expanding the target population of defendants investigated by the pretrial program;
- Moving from self-administered questionnaires to face-to-face interviews with defendants to obtain the information used by the court in pretrial release decision-making;
- Providing comprehensive training in interviewing techniques;
- Making verification by references obtained from the defendant the standard practice rather than the rare event;
- Expanding the options available to the court by introducing supervised release alternatives; and
- Transforming from manual files to a fully automated information system.

PJI also conducted a validation study of the risk assessment instrument the program had been using. Based on the results of that study, PJI recommended major changes in the ways risks were being assessed and in the recommendations being made to the court.

On September 2, 2007, after a year of planning, the pretrial program implemented these changes. In just the first month of operation under these new procedures, there was a 30 percent reduction in the number of defendants admitted into jail following their preliminary arraignment. The changes made to the program, and their impact on the entire system, were so substantial that they generated a great deal of controversy. Several system officials, including local law enforcement and district attorneys, were concerned that the program was recommending release in inappropriate cases. There were also significant concerns voiced by the bail bonding industry, both locally and nationally. To address these concerns (which were being aired in several local media outlets), in January 2008, the Presiding Judge of the Court of Common Pleas, along with the Presiding Judge of the Criminal Division, the District Attorney, and the Chief of Police of Pittsburgh, held a news conference to announce their commitment to the changes that were made in the pretrial release program. Since that time, the controversies have subsided, and the transformation appears to have been a success.

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The State Justice Institute is a private, non-profit corporation established by Congress in 1984 to provide support for projects to improve the quality of justice in State courts. SJI is governed by a Board of Directors appointed by the President and confirmed by the Senate.



NEXT GRANT & SCHOLARSHIP APPLICATION DEADLINE

Applications for all grants and scholarships must be received by SJI on **May 1, 2008**, to be considered for the third quarter of FY 2008. Please be advised this is not a mail date, but the date the application must be physically received by SJI. Notification of awards for scholarships will be completed by early June. New grant awards should be made by the end of the month, depending on the date of the Board of Director's meeting. The date of that meeting will be placed on the SJI website so that you will know the earliest start date possible for approved projects.

SPECIAL ANNOUNCEMENT

The Department of Justice/Bureau of Justice Assistance report: *Challenges and Solutions to Implementing Problem-Solving Courts from the Traditional Court Perspective*, is now available on the SJI website under "Select Grant Reports."

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Are you on the E-SJI News e-list? Would you like to be? If so, please send your name and email address to esjinews@sjj.gov to start receiving the E-SJI Newsletter.

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