



Fiscal Year 2026

Budget Request

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I. Overview of the State Justice Institute

The [State Justice Institute](#) (SJI) was established by Congress (42 U.S.C. 10701 et seq.) in 1984 to award grants to improve the quality of justice in state courts, and foster innovative, efficient solutions to common issues faced by all courts. SJI is a non-profit corporation governed by an 11-member [Board of Directors](#) appointed by the President and confirmed by the Senate. By law, the President must appoint six state court judges, one state court administrator, and four members of the public – no more than two of whom may be of the same political party.

SJI is unique in both its mission and how it seeks to fulfill it. Only SJI has the authority to assist all state courts – criminal, civil, juvenile, family, and appellate – and the mandate to share the success of one state’s innovations with every state court system.

SJI carries out its mission in a variety of ways that maximize the impact of its funding, including:

- Addressing national court issues as they occur, and developing solutions to those problems;
- Placing practical products in the hands of the judges and court staff who can most benefit from them;
- Making sure that effective approaches in one state court are quickly and economically shared with other courts nationwide;
- Supporting national, regional, and in-state educational programs to speed the transfer of solutions to issues shared by courts across the nation; and,
- Supporting national technical assistance targeted at specific issues in the courts.

SJI has supported numerous grants to state courts and court-support organizations that have improved the administration of justice in the United States. These include projects that have enabled the state courts to: respond to the opioid crisis; address mental health issues; improve services for America’s military families; enhance courthouse security; and promote fiscally-sound and data-driven policies and practices on sentencing. SJI has also supported many worthwhile projects that have improved state court performance, accountability, and the use of innovative technology to transform the business of courts.

SJI’s federal mission to support the state courts is critical to the successful implementation of federal policies and programs, especially in the areas of child welfare and automated justice information systems development. In almost 300 provisions of federal law, there are obligations, affirmative and negative, on state courts. This is in addition to federal policy through regulations, policy statements, and other pronouncements. For example, state courts are involved in federal issues such as child welfare, civil protection orders, crime control, national security, consumer protection, and land and water management. SJI grants enable the state courts to better meet these federal obligations.

SJI has experienced an increase in requests for assistance to help the state courts become more effective and efficient so that they can address these challenging issues. SJI support provides the state courts with significant opportunities to reorganize, innovate, and improve service delivery to the public.

Priority Investment Areas

Each fiscal year, SJI allocates significant financial resources to support its Priority Investment Areas. The Priority Investment Areas are applicable to all grant types. SJI strongly encourages grant applicants to consider projects addressing one or more of the Priority Investment Areas, and integrate the following factors into each proposed project:

- Evidence based, data-driven decision making
- Cross sector collaboration
- Systemic approaches (as opposed to standalone programs)
- Institutionalization of new court processes and procedures
- Ease of replication
- Sustainability

In FY 2025, the Priority Investment Areas are the following listed below in no specific order:

Opioids and Other Dangerous Drugs, and Behavioral Health Responses

- Opioids and Behavioral Health Court Responses – Research indicates that justice involved persons have significantly greater proportions of mental, substance use, and co-occurring disorders than are found in the public. SJI supports cross-sector collaboration and information sharing that emphasizes policies and practices designed to improve court responses to justice-involved persons with behavioral health and other co-occurring needs.
- Trauma-Informed Approaches – Judges, court staff, system stakeholders and court-involved persons (defendants, respondents, and victims) alike may be impacted by prior trauma. This is particularly, but not exclusively, true for those with mental illness and/or substance use disorders. SJI supports trauma-informed training, policies and practices in all aspects of the judicial process.

Promoting Access to Justice

- Procedural Fairness – A fundamental role of courts is to ensure fair processes and just outcomes for litigants. SJI promotes the integration of research-based procedural fairness principles, policies, and practices into state court operations to increase public trust and confidence in the court system, reduce recidivism, and increase compliance with court orders.

- Self-Represented Litigation - SJI promotes court-based solutions to address increases in self-represented litigants; specifically making courts more user-friendly by simplifying court forms, providing one-on-one assistance, developing guides, handbooks, and instructions on how to proceed, developing court-based self-help centers, and using Internet technologies to increase access. These projects are improving outcomes for litigants and saving valuable court resources.

Protecting Victims, Underserved, and Vulnerable Populations

- Human Trafficking – SJI addresses the impact of federal and state human trafficking laws on the state courts, and the challenges faced by state courts in managing cases involving trafficking victims and their families, including victims who are U.S. citizens. These efforts are intended to empower state courts to identify victims, link them with vital services, and hold traffickers accountable.
- Rural Justice – Rural areas and their justice systems routinely have fewer resources and more barriers than their urban counterparts, such as availability of services, lack of transportation, and smaller workforces. Programs and practices that are effective in urban areas are often inappropriate and or lack supported research for implementation in rural areas. SJI supports rural courts by identifying promising and best practices, and promoting resources, education, and training opportunities uniquely designed for rural courts and court users.
- Guardianship, Conservatorship, and Elder Issues - SJI assists courts in improving court oversight of guardians and conservators for the elderly and incapacitated adults through visitor programs, electronic reporting, and training.

Advancing Justice Reform

- Criminal Justice Reform - SJI assists state courts in taking a leadership role in: promoting offender accountability and oversight; transparency, governance, and structural reforms that promote access to justice; implementing innovative diversion and re-entry programs that serve to improve outcomes for justice-involved persons; and reducing the impact of the costs on the justice system.

- Juvenile Justice Reform - SJI supports innovative projects that advance best practices in handling dependency and delinquency cases; promote effective court oversight of juveniles in the justice system; address the impact of trauma on juvenile behavior; assist the courts in identification of appropriate provision of services for juveniles; and address juvenile re-entry.
- Family and Civil Justice Reform - SJI promotes court-based solutions for the myriad of civil case types, such as domestic relations, housing, employment, debt collection, which are overwhelming court dockets.

Transforming Courts

- Technology – Courts must integrate technological advances into daily judicial processes and proceedings. SJI supports projects that institutionalize the innovative technology that has successfully advanced the use of electronic filing and payment systems, online dispute resolution, remote work, and virtual court proceedings. SJI promotes projects that streamline case filing and management processes, thereby reducing time and costs to litigants and the courts; provide online access to courts to litigants so that disputes can be resolved more efficiently; and make structural changes to court services that enable them to evolve into an online environment.
- Cybersecurity – Courts must also be prepared for cyberattacks on court systems, such as denial of service and ransomware attacks on court case management systems, websites, and other critical information technology infrastructure. SJI supports projects that assist courts in preparing for, and responding to, these attacks, and share lessons-learned to courts across the United States.
- Emergency Response and Recovery – Courts must be prepared for natural disasters and public health emergencies, such as pandemics. SJI supports projects that look to the future of judicial service delivery by identifying and replicating innovations and alternate means of conducting court business because of pandemics and natural disasters such as hurricanes, earthquakes, and wildfires.
- Workforce Development – State courts require a workforce that is adaptable to public demands for services. SJI supports projects that focus on the tools needed to enable judges, court managers, and staff to be innovative, forward thinking court leaders.

For FY 2026, SJI requests \$5,971,000 to enhance its efforts to improve the quality of justice in the state courts. The request is \$1,669,000 below the amount included for SJI in the FY 2025 enacted budget.

II. Appropriations Language

For necessary expenses of the State Justice Institute, as authorized by the State Justice Authorization Act of 1984 (42 U.S.C. 10701 et seq.), [\$7,640,000] \$5,971,000, of which \$500,000 shall remain available until September 30, [2026] 2027: *Provided*, That not to exceed \$2,250 shall be available for official reception and representation expenses: *Provided further*, That, for the purposes of section 505 of this Act, the State Justice Institute shall be considered an agency of the United States Government.

Note. – This account is operating under the Full-Year Continuing Appropriations and Extensions Act, 2025 (Division A, of Public Law 119-4).

III. SJI Grant Programs

In order to carry out its mission of improving the administration of justice in the state courts, SJI currently awards six types of grants, detailed below:

- [Strategic Initiatives Grants](#) – provide SJI the flexibility to address national court issues as they occur, and develop solutions to those problems. These grants are awarded at the discretion of the SJI Board of Directors.
- [Project Grants](#) – are intended to support innovative technical assistance, education and training, and demonstration projects that can improve the administration of justice in state courts.
- [Technical Assistance \(TA\) Grants](#) – are designed to provide state and local courts with funding to obtain expert assistance to diagnose a problem, develop a response to that problem, and initiate implementation of any needed changes.
- [Curriculum Adaptation and Training \(CAT\) Grants](#) – enable courts and regional or national court associations to modify and adapt model curricula or course modules to meet state or local jurisdiction educational needs; train instructors to present portions or all of the curricula; and pilot-test them to determine their appropriateness, quality, and effectiveness.
- [Education Support Program](#) – enhance the skills, knowledge, and abilities of judges and court managers by supporting attendance at programs sponsored by national and state providers that they could not otherwise attend because of limited state, local, and personal budgets.

There are several reasons why the demand for SJI grant funding continues to remain high, including: 1) the state courts are dealing with severe budget constraints, and need financial assistance in order to conduct critical projects, such as addressing the opioid epidemic, the mental health crisis, and the impact of juvenile abuse and neglect; and 2) SJI has increased its visibility with the state courts through outreach, which combined with limited federal funds for the state courts in general, has led to greater demand for these valuable resources.

While SJI is excited about the continued interest in grant opportunities, there is limited grant funding available. SJI reviews grant applications on a competitive basis, and does not allocate grant funding by quarter. Therefore, SJI has encouraged potential applicants to submit their grant applications as soon as possible, since SJI funding is on a first-come, first-served basis for grant applications that merit an award.

SJI also hosts an online [Funding Toolkit](#) for state courts and justice system partners. The purpose of the Toolkit is to assist state courts and their partners in pursuing grant and funding opportunities outside of SJI, such as other federal agency grant solicitations and philanthropic funding. The Toolkit provides resources that encompass the entire grant seeking, writing, and management process, such as: current funding opportunities; planning checklists; sample documents; frequently asked questions, and fact sheets. SJI also provides technical assistance to

users during the grant development and writing process. The Toolkit enables SJI to maximize access to funding for state courts beyond its annual appropriation.

The state courts are unlikely to experience any budget relief in the near future, and many courts struggle to recruit and retain talented judges and staff. Therefore, SJI expects the demand for grant assistance will continue to increase. These grants are critical to state and local courts, and the FY 2026 budget request will support these projects, while continuing to use the other larger grant programs to address national court issues, such as opioids, mental health, cybersecurity, and juvenile and family justice reform.

Strategic Initiatives Grants

The Strategic Initiatives Grants (SIG) program provides SJI the flexibility to address national court issues as they occur, and develop solutions to those problems. The program also enables SJI to work with its stakeholders to address emerging trends that will have an impact on the state courts. Through this program, SJI applies its own institutional knowledge and expertise, as well as that of its grantees to address the key issues facing the state courts.

Opioids, Emerging Drug Abuse, and Mental Illness: Behavioral Health Collaborative Grant Program

The impact of the opioid crisis touches every aspect of the nation's public safety and judicial system. According the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services/Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA) data, the criminal justice system is the single largest source of referral for substance abuse treatment. Drug-related arrests involving opioids are skyrocketing. In many communities, court dockets and probation caseloads are filled with individuals with opioid use disorders. Access to treatment is limited, particularly in rural communities. The shift from prescription opioid abuse to heroin and fentanyl use is causing a dramatic spike in overdose deaths in some regions of the United States, particularly the Midwest and in the South.

In response, SJI funded a comprehensive strategy for responding to the challenges facing state courts in addressing the national opioid crisis. In partnership with CCJ, COSCA, and other key stakeholders, funding was provided to create the CCJ/COSCA [National Judicial Opioid Task Force](#) (NJOTF). This initiative identified and documented inter-branch activities to address the opioid crisis. Representatives from state and federal government and key national organizations shared strategies and identified unmet needs. The NJOTF created partnerships to address the impact of opioids on children, with specific emphasis on foster care, assisting state courts in developing opioid task forces, and working with existing state task forces to make recommendations for local response efforts. In addition, the NJOTF developed guiding principles that state courts can use for successful collaboration among treatment providers, criminal justice systems, and child welfare agencies.

The NJOTF pursued short and long-term objectives that: 1) highlighted the landscape of current responses and effective practices; 2) established a mechanism to engage justice system partners in collaborative efforts; and 3) provided immediate tools for state courts in addressing the opioid crisis. NJOTF activities include:

- Launching the [Opioids and Courts](#) and [National Judicial Opioid Task Force](#) webpages.
- Finalizing [Five NJOTF Principles](#).
- Conducting a survey to members of CCJ and COSCA regarding their needs related to the opioid epidemic.
- Collecting, disseminating, and evaluating court-based interventions related to the opioid epidemic.
- Coordinating efforts with other key stakeholders, such as the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services; National Governors Association; National Association of Attorneys General; National Council of State Legislatures; National Association of Counties; National Sheriffs Association; National American Society of Addiction Medicine and American Academy of Addiction Psychiatry; and the National Association of Drug Court Professionals.

In addition to the impact of opioid abuse on criminal courts, the nation's family and juvenile courts, and child welfare systems, are also deeply impacted. A report by DHS/Administration for Children and Families shows that from FY 2000 to 2019, the percentage of removals nationally due to parental substance abuse increased 18.5 percent to 38.9 percent – an increase of 20.4 percentage points.¹ Thirteen (13) states report that 50 percent or more of the removals are due to parental substance abuse.²

Adverse childhood experiences (ACES) significantly impact the likelihood of future substance abuse, violence, and justice system involvement.³ Prevention and intervention strategies, such as early identification of trauma and trauma-informed treatment, can significantly reduce the impacts of ACES. With SJI support, the National Center for State Courts (NCSC), the Institute for Intergovernmental Research (IIR), the National Council of Juvenile and Family Court Judges (NCJFCJ), and The National Judicial College (NJC) have developed a collaboration to assist state courts in addressing the impact of opioids on children and families.

Additionally, SJI partnered with the U.S. Department of Justice/Bureau of Justice Assistance (BJA), and the Centers for Disease Control (CDC) to provide funding to rural demonstration sites through the Rural Responses to the Opioid Epidemic (RROE) initiative. The RROE was part of a series of demonstration projects associated with BJA's Comprehensive Opioid, Stimulant, and Substance Abuse Program (COSSAP). SJI funding enabled the demonstration sites to include the state courts in their work, and ensuring courts have the resources they need to contribute to the overall objectives of each site. The Institute for Intergovernmental Research

¹ U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families (2020). <https://www.acf.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/documents/cb/afcarsreport27.pdf>

² U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. Administration for Children and Families, Children's Bureau, Adoption and Foster Care Analysis and Reporting System (AFCARS) (2019 v1).

³ Levenson, Jill, and Grady, Melissa (2016). *Childhood Adversity, Substance Abuse, and Violence: Implications for Trauma-Informed Social Work Practice*. Journal of Social Work Practice in the Addictions. Vol. 16, Issue 1-2.

(IIR) – a non-profit that has a long history serving as a technical assistance provider for BJA grants – provided the coordination and technical assistance for this initiative.

Building upon the RROE, and with funding from SJI, the NCSC, in partnership with [Rulo Strategies](#), launched the Rural Justice Collaborative (RJC) to showcase the strengths of rural communities, and highlight the cross-sector collaboration that is a hallmark of rural justice systems. The work under the RJC is supported by a cross-sector advisory council composed of rural judges, along with additional stakeholders in the justice, child welfare, and behavioral health, and public health systems. The RJC [Online Resource Center](#) serves as a national clearinghouse of promising and innovative rural justice practices. The RJC is identifying mentor sites that will host virtual or in-person site visits, answer questions from other rural communities via phone, email, or webinars, and participate in conferences and workshops to share promising and innovative rural justice practices.

SJI and its partners continue to work to address mental illness/mental health on a national level. This is in response to the increasing complexity of handling individuals in state courts who have mental illness, and oftentimes a co-occurring substance use issue. System-wide, mental illness has placed a strain on many communities and their resources, and jails are being used to detain those who need mental health treatment. Promising approaches are currently being explored to address this problem:

- The [Sequential Intercept Model](#) identifies where to intercept individuals with mental illness as they move through the criminal justice system, suggests which populations might be targeted at each point of interception, and highlights the decision-makers who can authorize movement away from or through the criminal justice system.
- Mental health codes require modification to permit timely, appropriately-targeted, court-ordered treatment for persons with mental illness, before and after contact with the justice system.

It has also been acknowledged that individuals who are intercepted by the criminal justice system often have co-occurring mental health and substance use issues, including opioid addiction.

With SJI support, CCJ/COSCA, in coordination with the NCSC is:

- Developing resources, best practices and recommend standards to address mental illness and the state courts response.
- Expanding the NCSC mental health [website](#) to create a centralized repository for state courts interested in improving court and community responses.
- Providing resources to improve caseload management of civil commitment cases as well as felony and misdemeanor cases involving persons with mental illness.
- Providing education by developing national, regional, and statewide training and education opportunities for judges and court practitioners.
- Developing guides and resources on the Sequential Intercept Model, and adapt the SJI-funded Arizona Presiding Judge Guide titled, [Fair Justice for Persons with Mental Illness: Improving the Courts Response](#) for use nationally.

- [Building capacity](#) of state and national court leader to lead and implement reforms.

Despite these resources, the state courts still need assistance managing the opioid crisis, most notably individuals with mental health issues who also have co-occurring substance abuse disorders. Communities are now flooded with fentanyl, and stimulant (methamphetamine and cocaine) use is on the rise. State courts must be able to address these emerging issues. In response, SJI established a Behavioral Health Collaborative Grant Program to document and promote innovative court-based programs that are addressing substance use and mental illness. SJI and its collaborative partners will continue to identify court-based programs that integrate substance use and behavioral health approaches such as screening, assessment, and programming, and share those innovative approaches with the broader court community. Using these innovative behavioral health approaches, the program is providing additional technical assistance and training to courts across the United States, conduct process and outcome evaluations of these new sites, and monitor implementation and overall impact. Additional activities include:

- Providing resources to promote court-based programs that treat families as a whole across case types, so that parents and children are linked with critical services.
- Addressing mental health and trauma of children who are involved the courts, both in dependency and delinquency cases.
- Pilot testing and expanding to new jurisdictions the SIM model for child welfare, with a behavioral health focus.
- Addressing polysubstance abuse, such as the increase in methamphetamine and other stimulants, and assist state courts in designing systems that are flexible to address the full continuum of care.
- Reducing recidivism by supporting court-based programs that link formally incarcerated individuals to obtain medical, psychiatric, housing, employment, educational, and other critical assistance.

Addressing individuals with behavioral health needs in state courts is a critical component of the national response. Despite significant new investments of federal funding in the opioid crisis response, more resources are needed to assist state courts in delivering successful outcomes. State and local governments, including the courts, bear the greatest burden for the primary and secondary costs of untreated mental health and substance use issues. Furthermore, the state courts are the most likely point of intersection between a community and an individual with behavioral health needs, and the most frequent referral point for treatment. These issues are not confined to state criminal courts – family, juvenile, and civil dockets have been exponentially affected by the scope and magnitude of mental health and co-occurring substance use.

Child Abuse and Neglect, Family and Juvenile Justice Reform, and Serving America's Military Families

Approximately 437,300 abused and neglected children live in foster care in the United States. Every day, state court judges are faced with difficult decisions impacting these children, continually challenged to find the right solutions in each of their cases.⁴ In 2020, 34 percent of child maltreatment victims were under age 3.⁵

In the 1980s, with the implementation of the *Adoption Assistance and Child Welfare Act of 1980*⁶ juvenile and family court judges became responsible for ensuring that a safe, permanent, and stable home was secured for each abused or neglected child coming before the court. The Act addressed the growing concern that children were being “lost” in foster care through the provision of preventive services and permanency planning. The law required courts to evaluate the reasonableness of services provided to preserve families, hold periodic review hearings in foster care cases, adhere to deadlines for permanency planning decisions, and comply with procedural safeguards concerning placement and visitation.

By the early 1990s, law and policymakers were beginning to recognize the need for timely decision-making and active judicial case oversight for abused and neglected children, resulting in the passage in 1997 of the *Adoption and Safe Families Act (ASFA)*,⁷ which marked the culmination of more than two decades of reform in the child welfare field. The Act codified many innovative state policies and practices that had emerged to respond to the multiple, often complex, needs of children and families. ASFA put time limits in place for permanency and the termination of parental rights so that children are provided safe and stable permanent placements more quickly. ASFA established the child's health and safety as the paramount concern in foster care cases.

As a result of these federal laws, and related legislation passed in the states, child abuse and neglect proceedings in the nation's juvenile and family courts were transformed. ASFA established juvenile and family court judges' role as the gatekeepers of our nation's foster care system. New demands were placed on the state courts, with oversight responsibilities requiring a large amount of the court's attention, workload, and resources. Unfortunately, many state courts have neither the ability nor the resources to meet these demands. Hearings are often rushed, and

⁴ National Association of Juvenile and Family Court Judges. Online. Available: <https://www.ncjfcj.org/child-welfare-and-juvenile-law/child-abuse-and-neglect/>.

⁵ *OJJDP Statistical Briefing Book*. Online. Available: <https://www.ojjdp.gov/ojstatbb/victims/qa02102.asp?qaDate=2020>. Released on April 18, 2022.

⁶ P.L. 96-272.

⁷ P.L. 105-89.

there are frequent and unfortunate delays in the timing of hearings and decisions, which results in children being left to grow up without permanent homes.

The report⁸ accompanying the FY 2023 House Commerce, Justice, Science, and Related Agencies (CJS) Appropriations Bill included the following language:

The additional funding is provided to enhance the Institute's efforts to improve the quality of justice in State courts and address the unique challenges of the opioid epidemic, mental health issues, juvenile justice, child abuse, and court technology.

In response, SJI [awarded grants](#) through a special Request for Applications (RFA) process in FY 2023. The purpose of these grants was to further improve state court efforts in addressing child abuse and neglect. The projects enhanced state and local court ability to handle challenging cases, and better serve youth and their families. The projects also addressed one or more of the following key principles:

- Keeping families together;
- Ensuring access to justice;
- Cultivating cultural responsiveness;
- Engaging families through alternative dispute resolution techniques;
- Ensuring child safety, permanency, and well-being;
- Ensuring adequate and appropriate family time;
- Providing judicial oversight;
- Ensuring competent and adequately compensated representation; and,
- Advancing the development of adequate resources.

In addition to meeting all other application requirements, SJI gave priority consideration for funding to projects that focused on institutionalizing, replicating, and/or building on national best practices and procedures surrounding child abuse and neglect case processing. Projects did not duplicate existing activities supported by other sources, such as the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services/Children's Bureau's Court Improvement Program.

SJI provided support to the NCJFCJ's [Enhanced Juvenile Justice Guidelines](#), which provided state courts with methods to ensure practices were aligned with recommended practice. With additional SJI support the NCJFCJ selected 4 juvenile court jurisdictions sites to participate in an Enhanced Juvenile Justice Guidelines demonstration project. These sites provided the NCJFCJ with information about the accessibility and usability of the Guidelines, which assisted in further development of tools and technical assistance. SJI support enabled the NCJFCJ to: 1) further develop the Court Self-Assessment Tool; 2) identify and address the needs of the juvenile justice field through the use of additional demonstration sites to expand the focus areas to include dual status youth and youth with mental health disorders; and 3) promulgate the Guidelines as widely as possible to ensure its broad adoption nationwide.

⁸ The FY 2022 Senate CJS Bill did not have an accompanying report.

Juvenile court judges are the most important public figures in the juvenile justice system. Their decisions determine whether: youth become court involved and for how long; they are involuntarily removed from their homes and communities; and the types services they receive. Despite the importance of these judges, states and local jurisdictions have generally not assessed if the structure, roles, and operations of juvenile courts support or hinder public safety and positive youth outcomes.

With SJI support, the Council of State Governments (CSG) Justice Center and NCJFCJ conducted an analysis in on how juvenile delinquency cases are structured and operate in all 50 states. The final report, [Courting Judicial Excellence in Juvenile Justice: A 50-State Study](#), highlights key recommendations to improve juvenile court policy and practice and includes examples of best practices across the country. Key recommendations include:

1. Establish specialized and dedicated juvenile and family court judges.
2. Ensure that judges hearing delinquency cases have the tools and resources necessary to adjudicate delinquency cases in a developmentally appropriate way.
3. Require all judges who hear delinquency cases to receive ongoing training on juvenile justice.
4. Establish dedicated forums focused on strengthening and supporting juvenile courts.
5. Identify statewide performance measures for juvenile courts.

Building off the report, CSG and NCJFCJ conducted an implementation initiative that provided technical assistance to implement the recommendations in three states: Oregon, Montana, and Mississippi. CSG and NCJFCJ also created and launched a first of its kind juvenile justice court training institute on juvenile court research and best practices as a resource for judges that handle delinquency cases. CSG and the NCJFCJ also conducted a follow-up implementation initiative to advance the recommendations outlined in the report at both the state and national levels by: 1) providing intensive technical assistance for three states to strengthen juvenile court policy and practice, in alignment with research on what works to improve public and youth outcomes; and 2) creating an unprecedented juvenile justice court training institute to serve as a resource for judges who handle delinquency cases.

Juvenile offenses occurring on military installations may be subject to a patchwork of processes depending on whether the military installation has exclusive jurisdiction, concurrent jurisdiction with states, or arrangements memorialized within MOUs. When concurrent jurisdiction is not present, infractions committed by juveniles may be adjudicated in the federal courts, which lacks appropriate juvenile-focused resources and may default to trying juveniles as adults. Department of Defense policy directs commanders to seek to establish MOUs at the installation command level with appropriate civilian agencies that include procedures for improving information sharing on domestic abuse investigations, arrests, and prosecutions involving military personnel. Collaboration between state courts and military installations is needed to foster better outcomes for juvenile offenders, their families, and the local military community.

With SJI support, NCJFCJ hosted the first-ever National Summit on Courts and the Military. The goal of summit was to create a forum for collaborative relationships between the state courts and military bases to better assist military families. Post-summit, NCJFCJ identified the following major needs: 1) education and training for courts and the military on their roles and responsibilities; 2) resources available for military families; 3) judicial and command collaboration; 4) judicial and command leadership; and 5) assessing the needs and risks for military families. These needs were further highlighted via surveys to family and juvenile court judges, who confirmed they wanted to know more about issues such as kinship care for children of deployed parent(s), the effects of military service on neurological and psychological status, and domestic violence issues.

SJI further enabled the NCJFCJ to launch a Military Families in Juvenile and Family Courts Initiative. The initiative: formulated uniform standards for information and resource sharing, with a major emphasis on the development of templates for MOUs between state courts and military posts; identified and recruited juvenile and family courts in jurisdictions with significant military presence to serve as pilot sites; created an online [National Resource Center](#) on Military Families in the Juvenile and Family Courts, which includes documents for state courts/military installations, such as template MOUs, bench cards, resource guidelines, and links to services; and developed a training curriculum for judges, military command, and key stakeholders on the unique issues of military families.

The [*Landscape of Domestic Relations in State Courts*](#), published by the SJI-funded [Cady Initiative for Family Justice Reform](#) documented the severe deficiencies in family court data. Since then, the NCSC has worked with courts to improve family case management. These efforts have not been fully successful because courts lack the data and/or capacity to analyze processes beyond the basics. For example, many cases, whether contested or uncontested, consume the same amount of time, demonstrating that cases are not managed commensurate with need. In part, this is because many courts are unable to distinguish until months after filing if a case is contested or not. Furthermore, the data revealed that one in four family cases, especially those involving children, are reopened. Many courts are still challenged to report whether activity is pre- or post-decree.

In response, and with SJI grant support, the Cady Initiative created a cohort of courts that used data to manage family cases effectively, which serves as a national model. The NCSC: 1) selected 3-4 court sites according to strict readiness criteria, analyze their data, and recommended improvements; 2) conducted a dashboard that the courts populate and use to manage cases via individual and group coaching; and 3) analyzed collective results, publicized the findings, and solicit the next cohort of court sites.

State Court Technology

SJI has a strong history of supporting innovative technology projects that have improved court processes and procedures. SJI supports projects that institutionalize the innovative technology that has successfully advanced the use of electronic filing and payment systems, online dispute resolution, remote work, and virtual court proceedings. SJI promotes projects that streamline case filing and management processes, thereby reducing time and costs to litigants and the courts; provide online access to courts to litigants so that disputes can be resolved more efficiently; and make structural changes to court services that enable them to evolve into an online environment.

Additionally, SJI continues to support the examination of potential integration of Artificial Intelligence (AI) into court processes, including identification of positive outcomes and potential limitations of AI. SJI awarded a grant to the NCSC to develop two products: 1) guidelines for the ethical and evidence-based use of AI technologies in the state courts; and 2) an AI Impact Assessment Tool for the state courts. The guidelines will provide a framework for defining norms, values, and ethical principles related to the uses of AI in state courts. The impact assessment tool will lead courts that are considering adopting specific AI tools through the decision-making process. The AI guidelines and AI Impact Assessment Tool will help ensure that state courts are aligned with each other and with the latest scientific developments in their policy making around AI. The project will build a structure for keeping both the guidelines and the impact assessment tool up to date as the science of AI advances.

State courts rely on secure and functional technology systems to serve the public; therefore, it is critical that court leadership have the knowledge and tools to mitigate, and to quickly respond to, events that impact those systems. This is especially important as cybersecurity attacks have increased in complexity and sophistication, paired with the impact of natural disasters on technology systems. Over the past few years, three state court systems, and many local courts have experienced cyberattacks. SJI funded a grant to the NCSC to conduct five regional hybrid summits (online and then in-person), where court leaders will gain a deeper understanding of cybersecurity and technical disaster recovery resources and tools, enabling them to prevent, respond to, and recover from cybersecurity events.

Experts from the NCSC, Center for Internet Security/Multistate Information Sharing and Analysis Center will review, compile, and create materials that will be used both online and in person to facilitate the regional summits. The curriculum development process include a review of the materials by members of the COSCA and National Association for Court Management Joint Technology Committee. The regional summits will enable participants to better prepare for, and respond to cybersecurity events. Teams will be encouraged to establish recovery plans, policies, and annual tabletop exercises to ensure ongoing preparedness for cybersecurity and disaster recovery events.

With SJI grant funding, the Utah and New York judiciaries were able to develop Online Dispute Resolution (ODR) platforms to better assist litigants. Both states launched ODR platforms that are mandatory for small claims cases. Recently, SJI provided support to develop ODR platforms for: 1) the Tennessee Judiciary to address medical debt cases; and 2) the Ohio Judiciary to

address evictions/foreclosures and family cases. These systems allow parties to access their case online, communicate and negotiate a resolution, receive individualized assistance from a facilitator, and if necessary, involve a judge. The systems guide users to their trial date, which is often held online. Court processes are adapted to work efficiently in an online environment without sacrificing the rights or interests of parties. ODR is proving to be easier, faster, and cheaper than traditional practice, while providing all parties the opportunity to be heard and treated fairly.

The [National Open Court Data Standards](#) (NODS) were developed by the NCSC, and are endorsed by COSCA and the National Association for Court Management (NACM). The purpose of the SJI-funded NODS implementation project is to facilitate the consistency and sharing of state court data by standardizing logical and technical data standards. NCSC is working with states and courts to help them assess their needs, develop strategic plans for NODS adoption, helping courts map their data to the standards and then creating programs that enable consistent extracts. NCSC is also providing assistance to courts in developing data governance policies relative to data standards, data quality, and data sharing. NCSC will apply the knowledge gained from this process to create implementation case studies, improve the leadership and user guides to NODS, and create a NODS guide for users of court data.

Legal Deserts and the State Court Response

There are created unprecedented challenges for rural jurisdictions in recruiting and retaining attorneys to work in the criminal justice system. Rural courts have been particularly hard hit, and there are many areas where there are few or even no lawyers – such areas referred to as “legal deserts.” Nearly 26,000 lawyers work in Minnesota with 4.6 attorneys per 1,000 people, which is the seventh-highest ratio of lawyers per 1,000 in the United States. However, when the numbers are broken by county, most of these attorneys are in metropolitan areas. In Kansas, 80 percent of all attorneys live in six urban counties, leaving rural communities struggling to find legal help. There is a ratio of 2 attorneys per 535 residents in urban areas, and a ratio of 1 attorney per 808 residents in rural areas in Kansas. Iowa, Indiana, Kansas, Nebraska, North Dakota, and South Dakota all have less than 3 attorneys per 1,000 citizens, and Michigan has less than 4 attorneys per 1,000 citizens. Rural residents are forced to travel long distances to find lawyers to handle routine matters that affect their everyday lives, such as wills, divorces, and minor criminal and civil cases.

To address these issues, SJI awarded a grant to the NCSC to: 1) provide technical assistance to the Midwest Region of the CCJ/COSCA⁹; and 2) assist with an additional event focusing on these issues in another CCJ/COSCA region. The technical assistance enabled state judicial leaders to evaluate the legal deserts in their state, and highlighted innovative programs throughout the region addressing this issue, with a focus on recruitment and retention of attorneys in rural areas.

SJI is also supporting the South Dakota Judiciary is currently working on a project to improve the recruitment and retention of lawyers in rural areas. The project is examining the bar admissions process, including whether the current process satisfactorily assesses professional competency to practice law, and identifying the options available to the existing bar admissions process. It is anticipated that SJI will receive additional grant applications to address these issues in FY 2026.

Guardianship, Conservatorship, and Elder Issues

With support from SJI, the [Center for Elders and the Courts](#) is addressing guardianship and conservatorship issues in the state courts through a multi-year response that targets four key goals: 1) Develop and maintain a partnership of key stakeholders; 2) Prioritize the protection and enhancement of individual rights; 3) Promote modernization and transparency in the guardianship process; and, 3) Enhance guardianship/conservatorship court processes and oversight. SJI has also provided direct support to the Minnesota Judiciary to develop an electronic conservatorship monitoring system, which is being replicated in other states. A parallel electronic guardianship monitoring system is also being developed to better enable state courts to monitor guardianship reports and provide online access to guardians, which will improve compliance and reduce the burden of reporting. The project focuses on how the state courts, in partnership with their justice system stakeholders, can fulfill the obligation of upholding the Constitution and protecting the individual rights of all citizens.

Project Grants

Project Grants are the centerpiece of SJI's efforts to improve the administration of justice in state courts nationwide, and are intended to: 1) formulate new court procedures and techniques, or creatively enhance existing procedures and techniques; 2) address aspects of state judicial systems that are in special need of attention; 3) develop products, services, and techniques of national significance that may be used in other states; and/or 4) create and disseminate products that transfer information and ideas developed for relevant audiences, or provide technical assistance to facilitate the adaptation of effective programs in other court jurisdictions.

⁹ States included in the Midwest Region of CCJ/COSCA are: Michigan, Minnesota, North Dakota, South Dakota, Iowa, Missouri, Ohio, Kansas, Wisconsin, Nebraska, Illinois, and Indiana.

There have been many successful Project Grants funded by SJI. These include support to: the Kentucky Administrative Office of the Courts for a summit on mental health; the Pennsylvania Courts for a [National Open Data Standards](#) project; the Texas Judiciary to examine and enhance remote hearings; the Center for Court Innovation to develop an online human trafficking tool and technical assistance; the Missouri Judiciary to develop a comprehensive circuit court realignment plan, as required by state law; the Minnesota Judicial Branch to expand an electronic conservatorship system by adding guardianship filing to improve compliance and effectively monitor the safety of wards; the New Mexico Administrative Office of the Courts to improve access to justice for native peoples in state courts; and the North Carolina Administrative Office of the Courts to support a statewide commission on judicial reform.

Technical Assistance Grants

Technical Assistance (TA) Grants provide state and local courts with funding to obtain expert assistance to diagnose a problem, develop a response to that problem, and initiate implementation of any needed changes. While much smaller in size, scope, and awarded amount than Project or Partner Grants, TA Grants are still valuable to state courts because they help them address significant issues such as caseload, strategic planning, and court procedures.

SJI awards numerous TA Grants each year that have a positive impact on the state courts. This includes grants to: the New Hampshire Judicial Branch for strategic planning and technology projects; the Kansas Judicial Branch for an organizational assessment and to implement e-filing services for self-represented litigants; the 37th Judicial Circuit of Alabama for a caseload assessment to improve operations; the 18th Judicial District of Kansas to transition from a centralized to individual court calendaring system; the Connecticut Judicial Branch for electronic records management and triage projects; the Texas courts for various projects, including family law cases and municipal court improvements; and the Illinois Supreme Court for a mental health task force implementation project.

Curriculum Adaptation & Training Grants

Curriculum Adaptation & Training (CAT) Grants enable courts and national court associations to modify and adapt model curricula or course modules to meet state or local jurisdiction educational needs; train instructors; and pilot-test curricula. More specifically, CAT Grants are intended to enable courts, court associations, and court support organizations to create, modify, and adapt model curricula or course modules to meet national, state, or local educational needs; train instructors to present portions or all of the curricula; and pilot-test them to determine their appropriateness, quality, and effectiveness. In addition, CAT Grants help conduct judicial branch education and training programs led by either expert or in-house personnel, designed to prepare judges and court personnel for innovations, reforms, and/or new technologies recently adopted by grantee courts. These grants are extremely important because state court budget reductions have significantly reduced, and in some cases eliminated, judicial training opportunities. CAT Grants support in-state training and certification programs, some of which are conducted online using proven distance learning models, thereby minimizing travel costs and taking advantage of training resources that are still available.

Recent CAT Grants include support to: the New York Unified Court System for a judicial faculty development program; the Kentucky Administrative Office of the Courts for an online Kentucky Pretrial Service Education Program; the Lubbock County, Texas judiciary for a training on mental health cases; the Tennessee Administrative Office of the Courts for a business courts curriculum; the American Judges Association for domestic violence educational programming; and the Georgia Council of Superior Court Judges for a judicial education project.

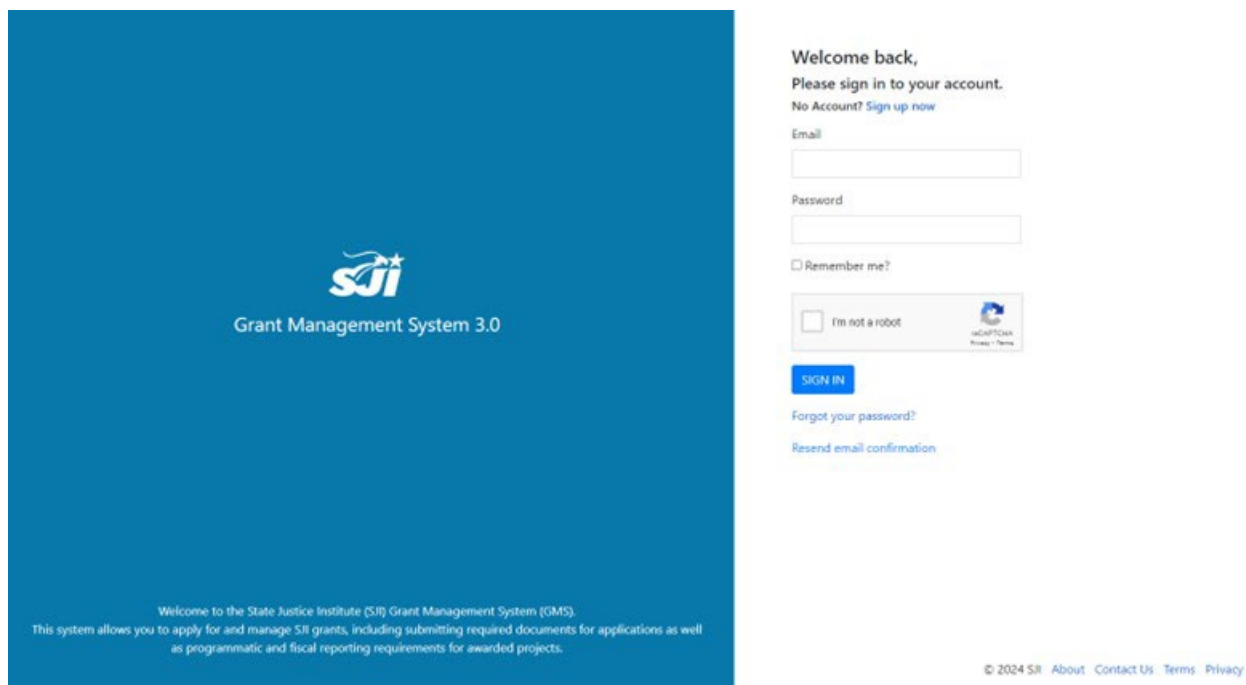
Education Support Program

SJI's Education Support Program (ESP) enhances the skills, knowledge, and abilities of judges and court managers by supporting attendance at programs sponsored by national and state providers that they could not otherwise attend because of limited state, local, and personal budgets. The program also provides state courts, judicial educators, and court staff with evaluative information on a range of judicial and court-related education programs. ESP awards are provided to qualifying judges and court managers to attend out-of-state, court-related educational programs within the United States, or online court-related educational programs.

Budget and Administration

Of the amount appropriated in FY 2025, 88 percent of funding will support grants and 12 percent will support General/Administration (G/A). The FY 2026 request will continue this consistent trend of maximizing funding towards grant awards. During the fiscal year, SJI seeks opportunities to realign G/A funding towards grants whenever possible. Over the years, SJI has decreased costs by contracting with the General Services Administration for financial management and payroll services, and private firms for consulting and information technology support for day-to-day operations. SJI also relocated in its headquarters in FY 2021, reducing rent costs by approximately one-half.

SJI hosts a paperless [Grant Management System](#) (GMS) to better serve applicants and grantees, and further improve the grant-making process. GMS is an online, end-to-end system that spans the entire grant lifecycle. The GMS enables applicants and grantees to apply for and manage grants, including through actions such as fulfilling reporting requirements and requesting reimbursement of grant-funded activities. The launch of GMS represented a considerable investment by SJI and reinforces its commitment to improving the grant application and management process and advancing state courts' use of technology. GMS has not only been overwhelmingly popular with applicants and grantees, but has also reduced the need for physical files and storage internally at SJI.



IV. Conclusion

SJI remains the only source of federal or private funding dedicated exclusively to improving the quality of justice in the state courts. There is a strong national interest in continuing to support the state courts, as there is with federal funding for state and local law enforcement, corrections, prosecution, and public defense. The state courts handle over 99 percent of all the cases in the United States.¹⁰ In 2022, state courts handled 64.6 million new cases, an increase of 2 percent over 2021. New civil cases were up 5 percent from 2021 to 2022; domestic relations and criminal cases were up 2 percent; traffic cases increased by 1 percent; and juvenile cases, increased 7 percent. Nearly all of the increase in juvenile cases was a result of increased delinquency cases, reversing a downward trend over the last five years.¹¹

Many state courts are struggling to provide efficient and effective services to the public. Civil actions – foreclosures, tort, contract, small claims, probate, mental health, and civil appeals cases – constitute a growing area for state courts as the population ages, discovery delays increase, appeals courts are inundated with dissatisfied litigants and substantive legal challenges. SJI has

¹⁰ National Center for State Courts. Court Statistics Project. 2018. *State Court Caseload Digest*.

¹¹ National Center for State Courts. Court Statistics Project. 2024. *2022 Caseload Highlights*.

experienced an increase in grant applications seeking assistance to help the state courts become more administratively effective, so that they can address these issues. SJI support provides the state courts with significant opportunities to reorganize, innovate, and improve service delivery to the public.

States have established human trafficking, domestic violence, and sexual assault laws for victims, modeled after federal laws and policies. These federal and state laws are focused primarily on law enforcement and prosecution, and the state courts need to be knowledgeable about the impact of these laws on victims and their families. For example, state court judges can play a significant role in identifying victims of human trafficking, including those who are U.S. citizens, and linking them to appropriate services. In addition to supporting direct technical assistance to the state courts, SJI will also continue coordinating with its federal partners to promote collaboration between the state courts and federal agencies on this critical issue.

In addition to addressing the opioid crisis, SJI is currently addressing mental illness in state court cases. This is in response to the increasing complexity of handling individuals in state courts who have mental illness, and oftentimes a co-occurring substance use issue. System-wide, mental illness has placed a strain on many communities and their resources, and jails are being used to detain those who need mental health treatment. The problem is exacerbated by the lack of a coordinated national, state, and community effort involving all three branches of government. In addition, lack of resources, empirically-based data, and a clearinghouse for state court leaders to learn the practical steps they can take to address the problem in their court systems also contribute to the problem.

One solution that will continue to be deployed is the use of technology to address state court staffing shortages and meet the ever-increasing demand among court users for online case management. AI will no doubt play a major role in all facets of court processes. How AI can be used efficiently, effectively, and ethically will be a major focus for SJI and its partners. Finally, state courts will face challenges in ensuring access to justice for citizens and businesses, both large and small, that require adjudication of disputes. Therefore, a strong SJI grant program is required to assist the state courts in better serving the public, and administering justice fairly and effectively. The funding requested for FY 2026 will enable SJI to continue identifying issues that impact all courts, fostering innovative solutions, and sharing information about successful approaches nationwide.

V. Exhibits

Summary of Requirements

State Justice Institute

Salaries and Expenses

(Dollars in Thousands)

	FY 2026 President's Budget		
	Perm. Pos.	FTE	Amount
FY 2025 Enacted	3	3	7,640
Adjustments to Base			
Personnel Compensation			5
Rent, Communications & Utilities			4
Other Services			(17)
Total Adjustments to Base			(8)
FY 2026 Current Services	3	3	7,632
Total, Program Changes			(1,661)
FY 2026 Total Request	3	3	\$5,971

Summary of Requirements
State Justice Institute
Salaries and Expenses
(Dollars in Thousands)

Estimates by Budget Activity	FY 2025 Enacted			FY 2026 Adjustments to Base			FY 2026 Current Services			FY 2026 Program Changes			FY 2026 President's Budget		
	Pos.	FTE	Amount	Pos.	FTE	Amount	Pos.	FTE	Amount	Pos.	FTE	Amount	Pos.	FTE	Amount
General Administration	3	3	928	0	0	(8)	3	3	920	0	0	0	3	3	920
Grants															
Project Grants			712						712			0			712
Strategic Initiatives Grants			4,695						4,695			(1,661)			3,034
Technical Assistance Grants			725						725			0			725
Curriculum Adaptation & Training Grants			315						315			0			315
Education Support Program			265						265			0			265
Subtotal, Grants			6,712			0			6,712			(1,661)			5,051
Grand Total	3	3	\$7,640	0	0	(\$8)	3	3	\$7,632	0	0	(\$1,661)	3	3	\$5,971

B. Justification for Base Adjustments

Justification for Base Adjustments State Justice Institute

Increases

Personnel Compensation: For FY 2026, this request includes an increase of \$4,870 for benefits.

Rent, Communications, & Utilities: The request includes an increase of \$4,918 for rent in FY 2026.

Other Services: For FY 2026, this request includes an increase of \$2,413 for financial statements audit.

Decreases

Other Services: For FY 2026, this request includes a decrease of -\$18,098 for other services.

C: Summary of Requirements by Object Class

Summary of Requirements by Object Class

State Justice Institute

Salaries and Expenses

(Dollars in Thousands)

Object Classes	FY 2025 Enacted		FY 2026 President's Budget		Increase/Decrease	
	FTE	Amount	FTE	Amount	FTE	Amount
11.1 Salaries	3	366	3	366	0	0
Total	3	366	3	366	0	0
Other Object Classes:						
12.0 Personnel benefits		142		147		5
21.0 Travel and transportation of persons		34		34		0
23.1 Rent		102		105		3
(Multiple) Comm., util., & other misc. charges		9		9		0
24.0 Printing and reproduction		9		9		0
25.0 Other services		263		247		(16)
26.0 Supplies, & Materials		1		1		0
28.1 Taxes & Fees		1		1		0
31.0 Equipment		1		1		0
Subtotal, General Administration	3	928	3	920	0	(8)
Subtotal, Grant Funding		6,766		5,051		(1,715)
Total Obligations	3	\$7,694	3	\$5,971	0	(\$1,723)