

## 2021 Opportunity Grant Recipients

### Ameelio (CT/national)

(\$20,000)

Especially during COVID-19, with prisons on lockdown, accessible communications for prisoners with support networks and reentry organizations are even more critical. As private for-profit companies exploit incarcerated people and vulnerable families who want to remain in contact with their loved ones, Ameelio, a technology nonprofit, aims to disrupt this predatory prison communications industry by providing free communications tools. The ABE grant will support Ameelio's efforts to expand its communications technology with two new tools. The first will help incarcerated people effectively communicate with reentry organizations before their release, and the other will be the first free prison video conferencing platform in the United States. A trusted communication channel between incarcerated people and their support network is the essential first step toward building a rehabilitative justice system. To learn more, visit [Ameelio](#).

### The Brave House (NY)

(\$20,000)

By providing a supportive community, legal advocacy, holistic support, and mentorship, The Brave House provides immigrant girls and young women who are survivors of gender-based violence with the space and tools they need to belong, thrive, and lead. Supported by an ABE grant, The Brave House will develop an app to strengthen the sense of community it has developed and make it easier for clients to access the robust network of trusted resources and better engage with external and internal legal services. The app will revolutionize how young women engage with their legal cases and connect in real-time with wellness and educational programs, other app users, and mentors. This app is a crucial step in adapting to virtual interaction during Covid-19 and the increasing use and reliance of young people on digital forms of information and communication. To learn more, visit [The Brave House](#).

### The Center for Institutional and Social Change at Columbia University (NY)

(19,910)

Many incarcerated people acquire a range of legal skills while in correctional settings. Yet, they face persistent employment barriers, resulting in unemployment rates nearly five times higher than the general U.S. population. The Center seeks to elevate the existing legal skills of justice-impacted people and connect them to long-term employment. The program model revolutionizes the "reentry" approach by investing in justice-impacted communities and using peers as part of the educational and mentor teams. The Center will implement a paralegal training program with mentorship co-designed and facilitated by law students. It will match participants with a one-year paid fellowship, allowing them to contribute their talents to a legal services organization while also familiarizing themselves with its professional environment. The ABE grant will support this initiative's pilot year, with an eye toward replication at other law schools around the country. Refining individuals' skills and connecting them with these roles can be life-altering. It provides a consistent income and provides a pathway to a career in the law. To learn more, visit [Center for Institutional & Social Change](#).

## Choosing Justice Initiative (TN) (\$22,500)

Poor and vulnerable people awaiting criminal trials in Nashville can languish in jail for months or even years (on average nearly twice as long as those represented by a public defender) because they cannot afford to pay the bail, and their judge appointed attorneys do not zealously fight for their release. Often, their only hope for a better outcome is a different lawyer. Getting a new lawyer can be exceedingly difficult because judges control attorney appointments, and there is a perception that poor people “have no right to choose their lawyer.” With an ABE grant, Choosing Justice Initiative will create a *pro se* toolkit to equip people in this situation with the information they need to assert and protect their Sixth Amendment right to effective representation. Today, the constructive denial of counsel that occurs when appointed lawyers fail to perform basic services required for effective representation remains a significant problem. The harm to the individual and trust in the justice system is real and irreparable, perpetuating economic and racial injustices embedded in that system. To learn more, visit [Choosing Justice Initiative](#).

## End Violence Against Women International (EVAWI) (WA/national) (\$20,000)

Sexual violence can upend survivors’ lives, affecting everything from school to work to their personal relationships. Yet, most survivors never report their sexual assault to police because they fear they’ll be blamed for the assault or mistreated in the criminal justice process. Survivors of color, those whose English is limited, and people with disabilities often face more barriers and have even more concerns about whether they can trust the criminal justice system to support them. Layer on the health safety issues posed by COVID-19, and it’s clear survivors need an alternative reporting solution to hold sexual assault perpetrators accountable and prevent future attacks. With support from an ABE Opportunity Grant, EVAWI is partnering with VictimsVoice to create a self-guided online interviewing tool that sexual assault survivors can use to report what happened to them. This innovative tool offers survivors another pathway to justice, at their own pace, with more control over the process. To learn more, visit [End Violence Against Women International](#).

## Free To Thrive (CA-National Project) (\$21,000)

Human sex and labor trafficking are prevalent in the U.S., and many survivors need trauma-informed legal services to address the aftermath of their exploitation. The 2019 Trafficking Hotline Data Report identified 22,326 victims and survivors in 2019 alone. Trafficking survivors are among the most vulnerable population during the pandemic. Aided by an ABE Opportunity Grant, Free to Thrive will partner with the National Survivor Law Collective to develop the first national comprehensive listserv and database of human trafficking legal service providers. Because survivors need to be represented by trauma-trained lawyers who understand their trauma and do not re-traumatize them, the project will train pro bono attorneys nationwide. By facilitating cross-state and agency referrals, identifying legal deserts, and filling service gaps, survivors will have greater access to justice on a national scale. To learn more, visit [Free to Thrive](#).

## Georgia State University College of Law (GA) (\$18,000)

Under U.S. immigration law, eligible non-citizens may work with an Employment Authorization Document (EAD) (work permit). A work permit provides access to benefits such as social security numbers and driver’s licenses, allowing eligible non-citizen to become fully contributing members of their communities. Yet, work permits are often arbitrarily denied even when applicants meet all the requirements, resulting in significant upheavals such as hunger and homelessness. With support from an ABE Opportunity Grant, Georgia State University College of Law’s Immigration Clinic will recruit and train law students and licensed attorneys to represent non-citizens in this specialized area of law. The project will also partner with area law firms with robust pro bono programs. To learn more, visit [Georgia State University College of Law](#).

## Justice at Last (CA)

(\$17,500)

According to California Commission on Access to Justice's comprehensive study on "attorney deserts," many communities have no attorneys serving their specific legal needs, a situation exacerbated by COVID-19 related court and support service closings. For example, human trafficking survivors who were forced to commit crimes by their traffickers have unwarranted criminal convictions that haunt them long after escaping. An available remedy to vacate those convictions exists; yet, justice for survivors is denied with no access to an attorney. An Opportunity Grant from the ABE will assist Justice At Last in launching a pro bono vacatur training academy to make justice a reality for trafficking survivors. The academy will develop a curriculum for replications in other rural areas; train attorneys to represent survivors; train law enforcement, court personnel, and service providers to identify survivors who need legal services; and host virtual legal clinics. With convictions vacated, survivors can obtain stable housing and employment, access rightful benefits and rights, and move on with their lives. To learn more, visit [Justice At Last](#).

## Legal Assistance of Western New York, Inc. (NY)

(\$11,200)

Justice is effectively denied if people don't understand the proceedings or can't read or understand the forms. COVID-19 has caused an eviction crisis, especially for members of poor, marginalized, and vulnerable communities. Eviction consequences extend far beyond losing one's home, negatively impacting all aspects of life. As Legal Assistance of Western New York prepared to assist a flood of clients facing eviction, they identified two significant gaps in the system. First, court forms are complicated, not written in plain language understandable to the layperson. Second, court forms are not written in the first language of many of their clients. With the support of an ABE Opportunity Grant, the organization will simplify the forms, translate them into the five most commonly spoken languages in their service area – Amharic, Arabic, Spanish, Nepali, and Somali – and develop a sign language video for deaf clients. With a better understanding of the proceedings and accessible information about services and resources, clients will be more effectively served. To learn more, visit [Legal Assistance of Western New York, Inc.](#).

## Lowcountry Legal Volunteers (SC)

( \$6,402)

People living in rural America have difficulty accessing legal services as they are not readily, geographically available. Yet, their legal needs are no less critical. Identifying and implementing new ways to serve a rural population is the challenge faced by many legal services organizations. Due to COVID-19, mobile justice options with a combination of live and virtual services that close the digital divide are even more critical. With support from an ABE Opportunity Grant, LowCountry Legal Volunteers will develop a series of targeted webinars (both virtual and live) to address common legal challenges faced by individuals and families in rural areas, including divorce, child custody, support, and adoption; simple wills; and landlord/tenant disputes, including eviction. A new website will support these educational opportunities, which will be in both English and Spanish. Additionally, the organization will partner with local agencies to offer in-person service clinics using a mobile legal lab. To learn more, visit [Lowcountry Legal Volunteers](#).

## Philadelphia Lawyers for Social Equity (PA)

(\$24,000)

The collateral consequences of criminal records are devastating and often contribute to inter-generational poverty. Criminal records checks are used to make hiring and housing decisions and serve to deny educational opportunity, loans, professional licensing, driver licensing, and voting rights to many. Since 2019, Pennsylvania has been on the cutting edge of pardon reform, reducing the time it takes and costs and changing the perception of a pardon as a remedy only available to those who are rich and white. With the assistance of an ABE Opportunity Grant, Philadelphia Lawyers for Social Equity will create a network of "pardon fellows" with criminal-justice system experience to reach out to, educate and coach people eligible for a pardon. With these efforts, pardons are the remedy for the devastating harms of mass incarceration,

creating a pathway to better jobs, housing, education, and credit, thus improving the lives of individuals, families, and communities. To learn more, visit [Philadelphia Lawyers for Social Equity](#).

### **Public Defender Association/Civil Survival Project (WA) (\$22,500)**

Formerly incarcerated people face complex legal issues, including financial obligations from their conviction, child custody and parental rights issues, ruined credit, and lost public benefits. A lack of legal assistance for this population exacerbates the long-term effects of these issues, as do laws and practices that systematically deny formerly incarcerated people fair opportunities for living wage jobs, stable housing, job training, education, and professional licenses. These barriers create cycles of poverty, incarceration and contribute to racial inequality. Civil Survival, a Public Defender Association project staffed by people directly impacted by the criminal justice system, will use its ABE Opportunity Grant to launch a reentry legal aid clinic and hotline. By building a cadre of trained pro bono lawyers focused on reentry civil legal aid, the project will take full advantage of Washington's New Hope Act, which has made thousands of individuals eligible to vacate their criminal records, creating a pathway to a better life after prison. To learn more, visit [Public Defender Association](#).

### **Step Up To Justice (AZ) (\$20,000)**

For many low-income residents, owning a mobile home is a first step toward permanent housing. While residents may own the structure, most rent the land beneath it. All too often, owners are held hostage by unfair rent or fee increases, unstable or unsafe common-area maintenance, and even predatory lending practices in "Rent to Own" schemes. Often, if owners fall behind in rent or complain about dangerous conditions, mobile home park management starts eviction proceedings. If evicted, owners often lose the asset because it cannot be moved or is too expensive to move. In egregious but common scenarios, management resells these "abandoned" homes, creating title issues for the new owners, and the cycle perpetuates. With the support of an ABE Opportunity Grant, Step Up To Justice will launch a new online and live curriculum and outreach program that will explain legal rights and responsibilities to help low-income mobile homeowners avoid eviction and preserve their primary asset. To learn more, visit [Step Up to Justice](#).

### **Tennessee Immigrant & Refugee Rights Coalition (TIRRC) (TN) (\$14,715)**

In Tennessee, nearly 60,000 immigrants are eligible to naturalize and gain all of the rights and opportunities of U.S. citizenship. However, the complexities of the naturalization process and the lack of low-cost immigration legal services, especially in rural areas, discourage many people from applying. Large, in-person workshops are no longer sustainable, safe, or efficient. Conversely, "virtual representation" is not accessible to many in the target communities because they lack "technological literacy," computers, and the internet. With support from an ABE Opportunity Grant, TIRRC will launch a mobile immigration clinic/lab that will offer hybrid services both in-person and virtually, catering to client's needs and capabilities. Through the mobile lab, which will provide a technologically supported setting, clients can video conference with attorneys, complete forms online, and upload supporting documents, adding efficiencies to the process and serving more people. To learn more, visit [Tennessee Immigrant & Refugee Rights Coalition](#).

### **Until We Are All Free (MN) (\$22,000)**

The Minnesota Department of Corrections requires every person scheduled for release from prison to take a 3-hour "pre-release" class. The course and materials are written in system-based language by people who have never been to jail and never faced release challenges. Reentry is more than just a physical transition, and the needs of those affected are much greater than the basics of employment, housing, and transportation. For example, 27% of the return to prison situations result from a technical violation rather than a criminal offense. With the support of an ABE Opportunity Grant, Until We Are All Free will engage incarcerated

and formerly incarcerated leaders' assist in writing a practical and valuable pre-release handbook that reflects the lived reentry experience. It will focus on information and resources necessary for success, addressing the real barriers and challenges of reentry, including avoiding technical violations of parole and attending to one's mental and emotional health. With this blueprint for success, recidivism can be reduced, and formerly incarcerated people can have a fair chance at a better life. To learn more, visit [Until We Are All Free](#).