

2020 Opportunity Grant Recipients

Advocates for Immigrants Rights (AR, LA, MS, TN)

\$26,000

Thousands of immigrants and asylum seekers are finding a temporary home in communities across the country. To combat disparate and siloed human and legal services provision, three organizations serving migrants in four states (Louisiana, Tennessee, Arkansas, and Mississippi), Advocates for Immigrant Rights (AIR), the Community Legal Center (CLC), and Mid-South Immigration Advocates (MIA) are working together as Welcome South to increase their shared capacity and address systemic issues. The ABE grant will help fund the creation of an online platform to facilitate cross-network referrals between social service agencies and the legal programs, between the three legal programs, and to pro bono counsel and other legal services providers across the country. Through a more coordinated approach facilitated by the platform, clients can receive continuity of service, leading to greater efficiencies and better outcomes, including reduced re-traumatization.

Capital Area Immigrants Rights (CAIR) Coalition (DC)

\$20,000

The mass detention of immigrants is a problem not only on the southern border – thousands of immigrants are detained within hours of Washington, DC. Capital Area Immigrants Rights (CAIR) Coalition serves eleven local government detention centers, where access to a lawyer is the most critical factor in whether a person's immigration claim is successful. Due in large part to the prohibition of the use of technology in the detention centers, only 25% of the clients receive detailed legal screenings that help them make an informed decision about their legal case. With an ABE grant, the CAIR Coalition will create and deploy a novel technology connected to the case management database that will end the need to transcribe interview notes manually and will improve efficiencies, allowing CAIR Coalition to double or triple the number of screenings conducted each year.

Coast to Coast Legal Aid (FL)

\$32,000

A June 2018 study, "The Silver Tsunami: Is Broward Ready?" identified issues and challenges facing the elderly in Broward County, which included coordination of services and access to services resulting from isolation and lack of mobility. Coast to Coast Legal Aid (CCLA), the only free legal services provider in Broward County dedicated to serving seniors, currently cannot help many seniors who are unable to get to the offices. Without access, elderly clients often wait longer times to meet with an attorney exacerbating legal problems. With a grant from the ABE, CCLA will pilot an ideal service model which includes mobile service delivery to elderly individuals who are isolated or homebound due to reasons of geography, disability, income, language, culture, or residential setting. The project will also combat the devastating effects of isolation and loneliness and will aid in the identification of, and referral to, services for other needs faced by clients, such as medical care, personal assistance, food assistance, mental health care, and housing.

Community Law Program (FL)

\$33,500

Voting is a powerful tool for dismantling injustice. Democracy's foundation crumbles when citizens are denied their right to vote. In 2018, 64.55% of Floridians voted to amend the Florida Constitution to restore voting rights to 1.4 million citizens previously convicted of felonies (returning citizens). Months later, the Florida Legislature passed legislation requiring returning citizens to pay all of their financial obligations before they can vote, effectively eliminating access to justice and civic engagement for these individuals. Further complicating this process, no statewide uniform method exists for returning citizens to determine their outstanding financial obligations, and no available alternative solutions exist, such as court action or waivers of restitution. In response, the Community Law Program will use the ABE grant to start a series of Restoration of Voting Rights Remote Clinics serving Pinellas County, Florida. Grant funds will support the recruitment, training, and mentoring of volunteer attorneys and law students to host clinics twice a month in the community.

Connecticut Veterans Law Center (National)

\$47,500

Too many servicewomen and men who protect our country return to civilian life only to find they lack access to basic care for their service injuries. Alarming numbers of veterans struggle with PTSD, addiction, depression, traumatic brain injury (TBI), and other invisible wounds. More than 272,000 post-9/11 veterans have received less than honorable discharges, often due to behavior that is symptomatic of service-related PTSD or traumatic brain injury, thus excluding them from life-saving services and benefits. With an ABE grant, Connecticut Veterans Law Center will develop and provide free, expert level, easily accessible training and support to pro-bono lawyers who want to help veterans get a discharge upgrade. This training will include several in-depth, on-demand training videos for the legal issues, building a national pro bono network serving low-income veterans who have been unjustly denied access to healthcare, disability benefits, and supportive services due to their military discharge status.

Loyola Marymount University Project for the Innocent (CA)

\$37,000

The National Registry of Exonerations reports that 69.8% of women exonerees, compared with 21% of male exonerees, were in part convicted because the coroner incorrectly labeled the death a homicide. In California, while women make up only 4.4% of California's prison population, 10.3% of the known wrongful convictions were of women. Additional analysis of exoneree cases also shows a disturbing trend of juries relying on false forensic evidence, which is twice as prevalent in wrongful convictions of women, presented by "experts," and convicting women when no crime occurred at all. With an ABE grant, the Innocence Project will combat these injustices by identifying women incarcerated in California prisons with colorable claims of innocence in "no crime" scenarios, investigate these cases and litigate when appropriate. The grant will help support the creation of a best practice guide to avoid erroneous homicide determinations in cases with female defendants, which will be circulated among innocence organizations and distributed to medical examiners, coroners, and forensic pathologists across the country to prevent future injustices.

Middle Georgia Justice (GA)

\$5,400

Family law issues are the dominant legal challenges facing Middle Georgia Justice clients and constitute 50% of pro se cases. Unfortunately, there are not enough family law attorneys in this area and far fewer who take pro bono or reduced-fee cases. While various counties and judicial districts have addressed this gap by developing forms and instructions to assist pro se litigants, the gap remains because forms can be confusing and challenging to fill out, resulting in errors that clog the court system, grinding it to a halt. With a grant from the ABE, Middle Georgia Justice will open a family law self-help center where clients can get assistance to correctly fill out forms and file their claim from pro bono attorneys and law students. The grant will also result in simplified, fillable forms. This project builds on the success of self-help centers in other areas of Georgia, where the justice gap has narrowed when clients receive this critical support.

North Carolina Equal Access to Justice Commission (NC)

\$25,000

In North Carolina, 15% of all adult drivers have their driver's licenses suspended due to unpaid debts arising out of criminal proceedings or traffic tickets. Poverty, rather than the willful refusal to pay a court fee or appear in court, is the root cause of a significant number of driver's license suspensions. Additionally, catastrophic racial disparities result in households of color being disproportionately exposed to, and severely impacted by, traffic debt. Having a revoked or suspended license perpetuates employment insecurity, which can then lead to housing and food insecurity and other devastating outcomes that impact drivers and their families. Out of desperation, many continue to drive with a suspended license, risking further arrest and prosecution and mounting debt. With a grant from the ABE, the North Carolina Equal Access to Justice Commission will enhance and expand its Second Chance Relief website (secondchancedriving.org) and services helping clients obtain debt remittance and license restoration.

Pro Bono Net (OH)

\$27,500

The opioid crisis has added a new, urgent dimension to the justice gap in rural Ohio. According to the 2017 State of Poverty in Ohio report by the Ohio Association of Community Action Agencies, between 2012 and 2016, the percentage of Ohio overdose deaths due to opioids rose from 3.9% to 58.2%, the second-highest rate in the country. Data suggests that 70% of children in Ohio child welfare programs have opioid-involved parents, resulting in a dramatic increase in custody-related legal issues in rural, Central, and Southeastern Ohio. Placing these time-consuming, emotionally taxing cases using traditional pro bono programming has proved challenging and ineffective at closing the justice gap. The Bridging the Divide project is a collaboration of Pro Bono Net (PBN), the Legal Aid Society of Columbus (LASC), and the Southeastern Ohio Legal Services Association (SEOLS). With ABE funding, it will leverage a proven technology platform to provide meaningful, limited scope pro bono help to low-income pro se custody litigants, amplifying the existing resources such as online forms, pleadings, and pro bono clinics helping pro se clients in rural areas complete forms and file cases.

Public Interest Law Initiative (IL)

\$20,000

A cornerstone of the Illinois legal community for over 42 years, the Public Interest Law Initiative (PILI) has gone through a profound evolution into a statewide direct legal services provider utilizing pro bono attorneys to assist the most vulnerable in Illinois, including veterans and their families, those living in remote rural areas of the state, and those who qualify for legal aid but are denied service by their local legal aid agency due to a conflict of interest. This evolution included doubling its caseload from 400 to 800 in one year due to extensive program and geographic expansion. The ABE grant will help build PILI's organizational capacity by funding the technology infrastructure PILI needs to maximize pro bono delivery while ensuring the best and highest compliance with ethical rules and client management best practices. A new case management system will include functionality to effectively and efficiently serve clients, accurately conduct conflict checks and consolidate case and client data in one secure location.

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