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An Examination of the Bureau of Justice Assistance's
Field-Initiated Grant Program

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Aubrey Fox
Director of Strategic Planning
Center for Court Innovation

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A SPUR TO INNOVATION: AN EXAMINATION OF THE BUREAU OF JUSTICE ASSISTANCE'S FIELD-INITIATED GRANT PROGRAM

Since 2009, the U.S. Department of Justice's Bureau of Justice Assistance has made a number of grant awards under the "Encouraging Innovation: Field-Initiated Grant Program" initiative, with the goal of motivating criminal justice agencies to propose and implement new approaches to difficult crime problems. As a result, a range of new projects have been launched across the country in a variety of areas, such as changing the way public defender offices are organized, building knowledge about the use of cost-benefit tools among criminal justice agencies, and giving parole agencies new tools to make better release decisions. There have been four grant cycles, with grants being awarded in fiscal years 2009, 2010, 2011 and a new round of funding recently announced for fiscal year 2013.

I. INTRODUCTION

The Field-Initiated Grant Program has been novel in its design and execution. Unlike most federal grant programs, which carefully proscribe allowable activities, this grant program is largely (and intentionally) left open-ended. This means that grantees are given the ability to propose their own ideas and set their own priorities. In theory, both sides benefit from this process: the Bureau of Justice Assistance gets a view into the challenges faced by frontline criminal justice agencies while applicants receive the freedom and flexibility to propose their own ideas.

The field-initiated process reflects a sophisticated understanding of how innovation in criminal justice has operated over the past 25 years: rather than being directed from the top down, many significant developments (everything from drug courts to COMPSTAT to HOPE probation) have bubbled up from the field. The open-ended nature of the Field-Initiated Grant Program is designed to encourage criminal justice agencies to conceive and execute similarly creative ideas. In this way, this grant program offers the Bureau of Justice Assistance and

other federal agencies a potential model for how to stimulate innovation as well as a different means for structuring the relationship between grantee and grantor.

In an effort to better understand the impact of the solicitation, the Center for Court Innovation has conducted a study of the field-initiated initiative, which includes an examination of work undertaken by fiscal year 2009 and 2010 projects as well as a broader analysis of the field-initiated project. In performing this analysis, the Center for Court Innovation relied on its nearly two decades worth of experience creating, documenting, and implementing criminal justice demonstration projects, as well as its experience operating a multi-year inquiry on the trial and error process in criminal justice innovation.

Among the questions this report seeks to answer are: Did the field-initiated grant meet its goal of generating new ideas and programs? Did grant recipients perceive that this program allowed them to propose things that they otherwise wouldn't be able to do? What were the advantages and disadvantages of this open-ended style of grant-making? Do grantees think the Bureau of Justice Assistance should continue to support the initiative? And finally, what lessons, if any, does it offer to the Bureau's broader portfolio of projects?

II. BACKGROUND

The Field-Initiated Grant Program was launched by the Bureau of Justice Assistance's Policy Office in 2009. As described by the Bureau's Associate Deputy Director A. Elizabeth Griffith, the goal of the project was to "try to fund things that weren't already out there" and to "be nimble" in identifying innovative programs.

In its first year, 11 awards were made in amounts ranging from \$240,000 to just under \$1 million. Examples of initiatives funded included a national racial justice taskforce project operated by the American Bar Association and a national parole authority resource center developed by the Center for Effective Public Policy. A total of \$6.1 million was allocated to the initiative.

In fiscal year 2010, the initiative was given slightly more definition: instead of being completely open-ended, it was split into three categories. Applicants were directed to select which category applied to them. One option was to address an emerging crime issue in a state or local jurisdiction (for example, under this category, the Vera Institute for Justice was awarded funding to create a pretrial release program in New Orleans). The other two options addressed issues on a national level, either by proposing an innovative strategy or solution to a significant crime problem (such as an effort by the Pennsylvania Coalition Against Rape to pilot a "National Witness Protection Center"), or a strategy designed to sustain innovative or evidence-based programs (such as an initiative operated by the Justice Research and Statistics Association aimed at helping state administering agencies, which distribute formula grants from the Office of Justice Programs, implement evidence-based programs in their states).

In so doing, the Bureau of Justice Assistance refined the goals of the project somewhat, with the focus remaining on proposing new ideas at the local level, but with applicants given more freedom to propose sustaining and spreading evidence-based practices as opposed to completely new ideas. "Our focus was on innovating locally," said Griffith, "but we said it was also okay to look at existing issues at the national level." Applications

were capped at \$500,000 in the state and local program category, and \$750,000 for the other two categories. A total of 10 projects were funded with just under \$5 million.

Additional modifications were made in fiscal year 2013 (seven awards were made in 2011 and the program was not operational in 2012). In 2013, the Bureau of Justice Assistance introduced a two-step process whereby applicants were required to submit a short concept paper describing their proposal before submitting a full proposal. In addition, the Bureau of Justice Assistance directed applicants to align their proposals with the Bureau's strategic plan for 2013-2016, and specifically the five strategic focus areas identified in the plan: reduction of violent crime, the improvement of community safety, and support for public safety officers; reduction of recidivism and prevention of unnecessary confinement; integration of evidence-based, research-driven strategies into the day-to-day operations of the Bureau of Justice Assistance and the programs it administers and supports; increasing program effectiveness with a renewed emphasis on data analysis, information sharing, and performance management; and ensuring organizational effectiveness.

The following is a list of programs that were awarded funding under the the Bureau of Justice Assistance's Field-Initiated Grant Program in fiscal year 2009 and fiscal year 2010:

Fiscal Year 2009

- American Bar Association, "Racial Justice Task Force Pilot Project"
- Bronx Defenders, "Defining and Sharing the Best Practices in Holistic, Community-Oriented Advocacy at Public Defender Offices"
- Center for Effective Public Policy, "A Proposal to Develop and Operate a National Paroling Authority Resource Center"
- Council for State Governments, "Community Corrections Problem Solving Through Web 2.0"
- George Mason University, "Risk, Need, Responsivity Simulation Tool"
- International Association of Chiefs of Police, "Web 2.0: Community Policing Online in the 21st Century"
- International Association of Chiefs of Police, "Reducing Officer Injuries: Developing Policy Responses"
- Legal Momentum, "Connecting Law Enforcement to Immigrant Victims of Crime"
- National Judicial College, "Mental Competence Best Practices Model Program"
- National Center for State Courts, "Risk and Needs Assessment Instruments: A Guide for Courts"
- Vera Institute of Justice, "National Knowledge Bank for Cost-Benefit Analysis in Criminal Justice"

Fiscal Year 2010

- American Bar Association, "Pocket Guide of Legal Issues Related to Elder Abuse"
- George Mason University, "Skills for Offender Assessment and Responsivity in New Goals"
- Georgia Southern University Research and Science Foundation, "Innovative Programs for Special Correctional Populations: Assessing the Current State and Disseminating Program Information in an Innovative Way"

- Justice Research and Statistics Association, “Understanding, Promoting, and Sustaining the Use of Research and Evidence-Based Programs and Practices by State Administrating Agencies”
- Pennsylvania Coalition Against Rape, “National Witness Protection Center”
- Philadelphia District Attorney, “Grant to Sustain Performance-Based Prosecution”
- Rand Corporation, “Identifying Successful Strategies to Promote Program Sustainability”
- South Arkansas Substance Abuse, “Smarter Sentencing Pilot Project”
- Tennessee Department of Finance and Administration, “Sustaining Five Violent Crime Reduction Coalitions in Tennessee”
- Vera Institute for Justice, “Developing and Operating New Orleans’ First Pretrial Services System”

III. RESEARCH DESIGN

In examining the Field-Initiated Grant Program, staff from the Center for Court Innovation:

- Reviewed all relevant grant documents, including funding solicitations and program applications;
- Spoke with representatives at the Bureau of Justice Assistance responsible for managing the grant program;
- Reviewed applications for funding submitted by organizations that received grant awards in fiscal year 2009 and fiscal year 2010;
- Contacted representatives of organizations awarded funding in fiscal year 2009 and fiscal year 2010 for follow-up interviews.

A total of 19 interviews were conducted, which represents a significant majority of the 21 awardees from 2009 and 2010. To help guarantee honest feedback, interviewees were told that their responses would be anonymous and that they would not be identified by name.

IV. MAIN FINDINGS

Interviewees contacted by the Center for Court Innovation were uniformly positive about the field-initiated grant. The clear sense from interviews was that the grant program succeeded in its most basic goal of encouraging applicants to formulate a new idea or go in a different direction. In particular, respondents pointed to several concrete advantages that they believed the request for proposal afforded them.

1. The grant allowed recipients to target needs that would have otherwise gone unmet. On a basic level, the field-initiated grant appeared to work exactly as intended, giving practitioners the opportunity to propose and execute projects that would have been otherwise difficult (if not impossible) to get off the ground. This was perhaps the standout finding from the interviews—the commonly held perception that the projects funded by the Field-Initiated Grant Program would not have been launched but for the existence of the request for proposal itself. Responses included:

- “There’s no way we could have done this project without the grant.”
- “We could never have done this otherwise.”
- “It absolutely allowed us to do something that would have otherwise fallen through the cracks.”
- “I don’t see how we could have funded this without the request for proposal.”
- “I think it could have happened [with other funding], but it would have been really hard.”
- “Without [the Bureau of Justice Assistance]’s support and commitment to this issue, we wouldn’t be able to do this work.”

One respondent summarized the value of the Field-Initiated Grant Program in this way: “There are a lot of great ideas out there, but [government] puts out very specific requests for proposal for very specific projects. An open-ended funding opportunity is very novel.”

2. Recipients appreciated that the grant gave them a way to get ahead of the curve and respond to emerging issues. One theme that ran through the comments was that the field-initiated program allowed respondents to propose forward-thinking ideas. For example, as one project manager working on an initiative around social media guidelines for criminal justice professionals said, “Social media has just exploded in terms of how it’s used in criminal justice. With this grant, we were able to start just as social media was really exploding.” Another recipient working to develop risk and needs assessment instruments for courts said:

I’m not sure I could have gotten the funding in 2009 to do [this project]. But I might be able to get it now. The field has matured. But the way research projects work, you have to be looking over the horizon so that in two to three years, your product is available when you really need it. This program allowed us to have the vision to do things in a forward-oriented way.

3. Applicants understood the purpose of the grant. A third finding is that the request for proposal itself worked as a “signal” to the field: applicants apprehended that the program was meant to attract non-traditional ideas, and responded accordingly. As one respondent said, “Normally, everything that gets funded has to fit into some sort of announcement, but this was different.”

Another said:

There is huge interest in topics that are carefully defined. I think that’s good. But when there are opportunities for new and different ideas—things that haven’t been tended to—you want to open the door in a way that might not be immediately obvious to [the field]. I think it’s enormously helpful to have this kind of opportunity.

Even something as simple as a word choice in the request for proposal's title was important to respondents. "The fact that this grant had 'innovation' in its title was really important," one said. To her, the word's inclusion had a clear meaning: "it encouraged people to think about things differently and gave them the courage to try something new, which is a really good thing."

Applicants also appreciated that the open-ended nature of the request for proposal acted as a kind of endorsement of the field. "I saw [the request for proposal] as [the Bureau of Justice Assistance] saying that they knew the field could identify potential problems and solutions faster than they could," said one respondent. "It encourages innovation and allows folks who are closer to the field than [the Bureau of Justice Assistance] to identify gaps," said another.

Comments like these suggest that grant recipients are sensitive to language and nuance in grant documents. In this case, the way the request for proposal was structured was interpreted positively by the field. The Bureau of Justice Assistance should not underestimate its ability to send signals to the field through written communications.

4. The process of applying itself served as a spur to innovation. Inspiration for applications came from several sources. Some were individual in nature—an insight of a particular staff member or a practitioner with long experience in the field. As one respondent said, describing an initiative designed to gather and promulgate best practices in mental competence programs, "We had a program attorney who really wanted to do this. It was driven by her passion for the idea and our support of that idea." Another respondent described her project as "something I've wanted to do for a long time." Other ideas came from participation in larger working groups and in partnership with other organizations. In some instances the idea might have been germinating for several years, as in the example of a project aimed at learning more about how communities respond to witness intimidation. "It's something we've talked about doing for a long time," said one project manager.

Perhaps most interestingly, some organizations came up with new internal mechanisms for generating ideas or revived older ones that had fallen into disuse. For example, an initiative designed to address the particular needs of first-time and younger crime victims came from "a couple of young people on staff" during a half-day brainstorming session held by the organization, according to one respondent. Another successful proposal was the product of a brainstorming session the organization decided to organize after many years of not holding one.

Taken together, these responses suggest that the application process itself was a spur to innovation, causing organizations to think creatively about how to generate new ideas.

5. Grant recipients face the challenges of communicating the results of their projects to the field. If there was a common challenge identified by recipients of the "Encouraging Innovation" grant initiative, it was the need for help communicating the results of what they were doing to the field. Many were struggling to find appropriate vehicles to get the word out about what they are doing, both to other grantees and the broader criminal justice field. The approach of many respondents was to launch websites and/or use novel communication strategies like

podcasts or brief edited interviews. As one scholar leading a study on best practices in correctional settings said, “We need to provide information in bite-sized chunks that are easy for people to get to.” The project manager of another criminal justice initiative commented, “Instead of focusing on [producing] a great big report at the end, I would have been better served” with a mechanism for sharing “information about my project over time.” This suggests that the Bureau of Justice Assistance might want to think about investing in mechanisms for grantees to share lessons learned with one another.

6. Many of the organizations that ultimately received funding had long experience in applying for funding to the Bureau of Justice Assistance. This was both a good thing and perhaps a limitation of the project. On the one hand, the track record of more experienced applicants meant that they were able to more easily identify that the field-initiated project was different than a typical request for proposal issued by the Department of Justice and respond accordingly. As one respondent put it, “Let’s face it, people in the field track issuance of solicitations very closely.” On the other hand, it meant that the pool of applicants (and thus, potential innovations) was limited somewhat. Sophisticated, national organizations were well-represented among the grantees.

7. Respondents reported interest in learning more about other funded projects, and even those that did not receive funding. The Bureau of Justice Assistance might want to consider publishing summaries of accepted—and even a subset of rejected—proposals, given the novelty of this grant program. This approach might be particularly well suited for the fiscal year 2013 grant cycle, as applicants were asked to submit a short concept paper as the first step in the application process. The Bureau of Justice Assistance could publicize the summaries as a kind of annual “best new ideas” feature in conference presentations, blog posts, tweets, and other communications vehicles. It could be a relatively low-cost way for the Bureau of Justice Assistance to signal its ongoing interest in field-generated innovation, as well as a way to recognize high-quality applications that didn’t receive funding. Publishing proposal summaries might spur readers to try new things, or give them a sense of priorities their colleagues believe they are facing. It might also stimulate additional applications from local agencies.

8. Respondents uniformly believed that the Bureau of Justice Assistance should continue the program—or even expand it. Perhaps unsurprisingly, the Field-Initiated Grant Program was extremely popular with grant recipients. They felt like it represented something genuinely useful to them as well as the field. As one respondent said, “This is an important initiative that should absolutely continue.” Another provided a powerful endorsement of the request for proposal, saying “I don’t know of any other vehicle where you could have had so much creativity and support from an organization like [the Bureau of Justice Assistance].” The same respondent went on to say that he wished “the program could be expanded and given additional resources.”

V. CONCLUSION

The Bureau of Justice Assistance's Field-Initiated Grant Program is part of a broader trend in grant-making in the last several years. Grant programs designed to stimulate field-generated innovation have cropped up in other federal agencies (such as the Department of Education's "Investing in Innovation Fund") and through the White House Social Innovation Fund. Field or investigator-initiated grant programs are particularly popular in the research field, funded by a wide range of public, nonprofit, and private organizations (including Pfizer, Susan G. Komen for the Cure, the National Institutes of Health, and the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention, among others). These programs are based on a common idea: that opening up the grant process to the ideas of applicants can spur innovation. This report provides qualitative evidence that the Bureau of Justice Assistance's Field-Initiated Grant Program is working as it was intended, is broadly supported by the field, and is worth continuing into the future.

APPENDIX: PROFILE OF SELECTED PROJECTS

What follows are brief profiles of a handful of projects funded by the Bureau of Justice Assistance in fiscal years 2009 and 2010:

First Timers Resource Project for Young Adults—National Crime Prevention Council

In a series of internal meetings, the National Crime Prevention Council (NCPC) identified young first-time crime victims aged 18-24 as a population underserved by the existing network of organizations who work with crime victims. Their concern was that victim safety educational methods (such as McGruff the crime dog, targeted at children) were not appropriate for this age group and that new materials needed to be developed for them. They sought to identify a new strategy for reaching out to this group, including developing a new set of educational materials. This included convening a project review group, which reviewed a college curriculum and high school toolkit developed by NCPC. The college curriculum was piloted at a number of partner universities during their freshman orientation courses.

Knowledge Bank for Cost-Benefit Analysis—Vera Institute for Justice

Policymakers and elected officials are under increased pressure to understand the concrete benefits of criminal justice projects. The Vera Institute for Justice sought to create a clearinghouse of information about best practices in cost-benefit analysis, which includes a website (<http://cbkb.org>) with a range of materials, including a basic starter set of instructions for jurisdictions interested in the topic, toolkits, edited transcripts of roundtable conversations with experts in the field, examples of cost-benefit reports, and a blog that is updated regularly. In addition, Vera is working more intensively with six jurisdictions to develop their capacity to perform cost-benefit analysis. Interested jurisdictions filled out an application to receive technical assistance from Vera staff (no additional resources were provided by Vera). Applicants were required to identify a working group of officials and explain their particular interest in the topic. In exchange, they received regular in-person visits from Vera staff and ongoing technical assistance.

Racial Justice Task Force Pilot Project—American Bar Association

One of the priority areas identified by the American Bar Association's Criminal Justice Congress was the need to develop new tools for dealing with the emotionally charged issues of racial disparities in criminal justice. The American Bar Association developed a curriculum for addressing this issue, but had no funding or capacity to distribute it nationwide. Field-initiated funding gave the American Bar Association the opportunity to experiment with a novel way of offering the training. The American Bar Association offered training to four areas and a small mini-grant (\$12,000) for sites to gather data about existing practice. In the first year, a total of 14 sites applied to participate, and applications were reviewed in partnership with an American Bar Association-organized focus group. The four sites each worked on a unique problem. For example, Minnesota's focus was on reforming pre-trial diversion and bail practice for a predominantly Native American population. Delaware

focused on reforms to its probation revocation process; Brooklyn, on how minor misdemeanor offenses by juveniles were treated by the courts. Based on the success of the first round of the pilot, the Bureau of Justice Assistance agreed to provide additional funding so that the American Bar Association could invite a second group of participants to receive the training.

Risk, Need, Responsivity (RNR) Simulation Tool—George Mason University

In recent years, criminal justice practitioners have become more aware of the so-called “Risk-Needs Responsivity” Principle, which holds that in crafting sentences and supervision plans, justice agencies should consider the level of risk offenders present to the community as well as the need they have for particular interventions. However, in practice, application of this principle can be difficult, either because a given jurisdiction does not have the full range of services it needs or the capacity to evaluate the appropriateness of available interventions. To fill this gap, the Center for Advancing Correctional Excellence! at George Mason University has developed a set of web-based tools to help jurisdictions with these challenges. Their customized website (see www.gmuace.org/research_rnr.html) includes three different on-line tools that simulate an assessment of an individual offender, along with an assessment of individual treatment programs and the overall capacity of a jurisdiction to meet the needs of offenders.

Sharing Best Practices in Holistic Defense—The Bronx Defenders

The public defense organization Bronx Defenders is a pioneer of a so-called “holistic defense” model which seeks to supplement aggressive legal advocacy with a focus on non-legal issues like eviction, potential loss of welfare benefits or other collateral consequences that can be triggered by the criminal matter. With funding from the Bureau of Justice Assistance, Bronx Defenders created the Center for Holistic Defense to provide training and technical assistance to public defender offices nationwide. The Center does so by providing in-depth technical assistance to interested jurisdictions (the Center runs an annual competition to select participants) as well as other, less intensive engagement (ranging from training sessions to online access to experts and written material on the Center’s website, www.bronxdefenders.org/holistic-defense/). Based on the success of the project, the Bureau of Justice Assistance has provided supplemental funding beyond the original field-initiated grant so that the Center can continue offering its training and technical assistance tools to the field.

Center for Court Innovation

The winner of the Peter F. Drucker Award for Non-profit Innovation, the Center for Court Innovation is a unique public-private partnership that promotes new thinking about how the justice system can solve difficult problems like addiction, quality-of-life crime, domestic violence, and child neglect. The Center functions as the New York State court system's independent research and development arm, creating demonstration projects that test new approaches to problems that have resisted conventional solutions. The Center's demonstration projects include the nation's first community court (Midtown Community Court), as well as drug courts, domestic violence courts, youth courts, mental health courts, reentry courts, and others.

Beyond New York, the Center disseminates the lessons learned from its experiments in New York, helping court reformers around the world test new solutions to local problems. The Center contributes to the international conversation about justice through original research, books, monographs, and roundtable conversations that bring together leading academics and practitioners. The Center also provides hands-on technical assistance, advising innovators about program design, technology, and performance measures.

For more information, call 646 386 3100 or e-mail info@courtinnovation.org.