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State Justice Institute (SJI) Grants: How to Apply and Win

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Presented by Ashley Schultz and Shannon Day • Grants Office, LLC

Welcome and Introductions

Ashley Schultz:
Hello everyone, and welcome to our event. My name is Ashley Schultz. I'm the Manager of Community Engagement here at Grants Office, and today we will be discussing the funding from the State Justice Institute, or SJI, which offers between $5 and $8 million each year to improve the quality of justice in state courts. Those of you who are familiar with this program know it's a pretty unique funding opportunity, whereby state courts — who are usually funded almost entirely from their state or local budgetary processes — are able to secure federal funding for their education, training, and R&D.

Before we get started today, I'm just going to quickly note that this session is going to be slightly different from our other events, where we may have discussed funding for courts more broadly, touching upon between four and six different grant programs at a high level over the course of an hour. Today, we're going to exclusively dedicate our time to SJI funding. We want to take this opportunity to get really granular on this particular program and also to tailor our grant-seeking advice directly to those folks who plan to apply for it.

I very much hope you enjoy today's event, and you enjoy this new style that we're trying out. I encourage you to send any feedback to us at education@grantsoffice.com. I also encourage those of you who are in the audience today representing a judicial entity to consider who else among your peers may benefit from today's session and to please pass the recording along to them. As Shannon is going to detail here in a few minutes, this is a very competitive program, and the more folks who can learn about SJI and secure themselves grant funding for projects in their courtrooms, the better.

Today's Speaker and Agenda

Ashley Schultz:
Again, today we're talking about the State Justice Institute, or SJI. I'm joined today by Senior Grants Development Consultant Shannon Day, who heads our team of consultants dedicated to grant funding for state and local governments. Shannon has helped dozens — potentially hundreds at this point — of organizations just like you to navigate the ins and outs of funding for not only SJI, but also the U.S.

Department of Justice, the U.S. Department of Homeland Security, FEMA, and all of their state equivalents.

If you're a regular reader of our free magazine, FUNDED, you're going to recognize Shannon's name from her countless articles on effective grant-seeking for not only public safety, but for criminal justice organizations more broadly. In short, she's got a wealth of grants expertise on this program and on grants in general, and I think you're going to learn a lot from her today.

Here's a quick run-through of our agenda over the next 30 minutes or so. Once I pass things to Shannon, we're going to talk at a high level about SJI: what is it, what's it going to help you pay for, who can go after it. We want to make sure that before we dive into the nitty-gritty details, this grant is right for you. After we've cleared those hurdles, Shannon's going to tackle how to prepare a competitive SJI proposal. She'll talk about common proposal elements, what is and what is not allowed in your budget, and also some examples of recently awarded projects. Shannon's also going to show you an application workbook that we've made available. It's going to be available for everyone who's on the webinar today to use as a launching point for your proposal, and you can download it after today's session.

We'll end with a quick overview of some additional services that Grants Office can provide on this grant program — whether you need someone to come in and help you prepare a competitive project, review a draft of your proposal, or maybe you want someone to actually put pen to paper on your behalf and write the narrative for you. You'll also see here that we have time for questions from the audience at the end of today's session. If you'd like to ask anything about SJI or maybe share your experiences with the program, look to the bottom right-hand corner of your screen for the Q&A button. We'll get to as many questions as we can here at the end of today's session. With that, I'm going to pass things over to the very capable hands of Shannon to get us started. Shannon?

Program Overview

Shannon Day:
Thank you, Ashley, and hello everyone. Thank you for taking the time to join us today. And thank you, Ashley, for such an amazing introduction — I greatly appreciate it. As mentioned, we're going to spend the next 20 or so minutes to demystify the State Justice Institute grants. Many of you may be familiar with them, but a lot of folks aren't. Sometimes this funding source can be overlooked, but it is also incredibly impactful.

So, what is the State Justice Institute? It was established by federal law back in 1984, with a specific mission to improve the quality of justice in state courts and foster innovative solutions to common issues across court space. Think of it as an incubator for judicial efficiency and fairness. It's also rare in that it is a nonprofit federal corporation — so it's kind of governmental but not quite.

The Five SJI Grant Programs

Shannon Day:
There isn't just one SJI grant — it's a suite of grants. Under the SJI umbrella, on your screen you can see the five there. They range from large-scale project grants to more targeted technical assistance and curriculum adaptation and training, or CAT, grants. You're going to hear me use a lot of acronyms today. Hopefully I will spell them out before I go spewing them — like SJI, like TA, like CAT.

Project Grants are the centerpiece of SJI's efforts to improve administration of justice in state courts nationwide. This can also include local courts. They support high-impact initiatives in education, demonstration, and technical assistance. They're really intended to foster innovation in justice administration at the local, state, and national levels.

Next are the Technical Assistance, or TA, grants, which are focused on problem solving. For any of you from a law enforcement background, think of Project Grants as community-oriented policing; think of Technical Assistance Grants as problem-oriented policing. But in this case, it's problem-oriented justice. These grants are really designed to provide state and local courts with funding to obtain expert assistance to diagnose the problem first of all, design strategic solutions to the problem, and then hopefully begin to implement those solutions and get to your reforms.

Finally, the CAT grants — Curriculum Adaptation and Training — are intended to empower courts or court associations (you'll see the eligibility on the right of your screen as I talk) to modify and adapt model curricula, course modules, conference programs, anything in the educational sector to meet their educational needs. Funding under this initiative can cover the adaptation of curricula, instructor training, pilot testing, and any personnel training for innovative reform or new technologies in the training space.

The bottom two I'm going to cover very quickly on this slide. I'm not going to talk about them for the rest of the presentation because they have unique components, so to speak. The Strategic Initiative Grants, or SIG, are designed for flexibility by SJI. SJI sees what the problem is and hopes to address it. They allow the SJI organization to respond to any emerging national court challenges that they may see that can't wait until the next grant cycle. For SIG grants, you submit a concept paper that is different from the other three grants. Then, after SJI reviews it, they determine if the concept aligns with the current national priorities, and then you will be formally invited to submit your full proposal.

Finally, the Education Support Program, or ESP, provides essential funding for full-time state court judges and managers to pursue professional development. They'll pay the cost for courses, so it helps offset the cost for high-level courses. It ensures that if your organization has budgetary constraints and you can't send folks to take those courses, they can help pay for part of it.

As I mentioned, the application requirements for the latter grants differ, so if you have questions, you can reach out to us or you can visit the SJI website. It's SJI.gov — super easy to remember. They have so many helpful resources on that website.

Quarterly Deadlines

Shannon Day:
I also want to draw your attention to the deadlines. As you can see, they are quarterly deadlines — they are the same deadlines every year. The great thing about it is that they are offered quarterly. This is quite rare in grant-land to have quarterly deadlines like this. So if you find that planning for a May 1 deadline — for example, today it's March 12 — is totally doable, great. But if it's too daunting or your workload is too heavy, or you're taking a vacation, you can plan for August or November or even next year. That's what's great — it takes some of the pressure off.

Award Sizes and Match Requirements

Shannon Day:
As Ashley mentioned, SJI awards around $8 million directly on an annual basis. I say “around” because it's not really a set number, but that seems to be around what their total award sizes are annually. For Project Grants, state courts can apply for up to $300,000, while local courts can apply for up to $200,000.

I want to highlight the match requirement, because it is very important information and it may affect whether you want to apply for a grant or not. A lot of folks are reluctant to apply for grants that have match requirements. Project Grants require a 50% cash match. For example, if you apply for a $100,000 grant, you must provide an additional $100,000, for a total project cost of $200,000.

For TA and CAT grants, you still need a total 50% match, but only 20% of that has to be cash. The rest can be in-kind. For example, if you're applying for a $50,000 grant, you provide an additional $25,000 — $20,000 of which can be in-kind, and $5,000 must be cash.

Some examples of in-kind match for SJI grants would be contributions of time or professional services, space, rental, supplies, equipment, et cetera. These are services or supplies made to the project — not just “hey, we need some printers for another project.” They are for working directly on this grant-funded project. Yes, it is an investment. Grants are always an investment in time, and some grants like these ones are an investment also of additional cash. But the return on investment is system-wide improvement. It is significant. This match can also be spread out over the life of the project period, which I noted in the middle section here. You don't need to provide it up front. You don't need a bag of cash when you accept the grant. You do want to think about this, have your internal conversations, have

your planning, and determine if and how your organization can meet the match requirement. This will be an important factor in your planning phases.

FY 2026 Priority Areas

Shannon Day:
In its updated guidance that was published late last year, SJI identified five key priority areas for 2026, and they are on your screen. These pillars represent the most pressing challenges facing state courts right now, and they define where funding will have the most significant impact.

For Opioids, Dangerous Drugs, and Behavioral Health Responses, the goal is to foster cross-sector collaboration with projects that emphasize information sharing and court practices specifically designed to improve outcomes for justice-involved individuals who may have complex co-occurring behavioral health needs.

The second priority, Promoting Access to Justice and Procedural Fairness, really builds the public trust that is the bedrock of the judiciary system. By implementing research-based fairness principles and policies, SJI aims to increase confidence in the court system, improve compliance with court orders, and ultimately reduce recidivism.

Next, Protection of Victims, Underserved, and Vulnerable Populations covers a few critical subsectors, including human trafficking, rural justice, and essential protections regarding guardianship, conservatorship, and elder issues.

Fourth, SJI continues its commitment to Advancing Justice Reform, seeking innovative projects that move the needle in four specific areas: criminal justice, juvenile justice, and both family and civil justice reform. These should really be models that can be scaled and adapted across the judicial spectrum. Most grant-funded projects — they don't want them occurring in a bubble. They want to see how the project may be implemented by other agencies.

Finally, Transforming Courts may be the broadest priority area, addressing really the operational backbone of the judiciary. It covers the modern essentials of court management — from court health, safety, and cybersecurity to the adoption of innovative technologies, strategic planning, and workforce development. As I mentioned, it's a very broad priority area. When you're planning your project, it should address at least one of these areas, so you'll want to refer to them throughout your planning process.

Preparing a Competitive Proposal

Common Application Components

Shannon Day:
As you saw when you registered, and Ashley mentioned, we've created an application guide with more details to help you through the application. But I do want to cover the basics today. While the three grants I talked about the most so far — the Project, TA, and CAT grants — all have specific requirements, the components on your screen are common to all three of the grant programs.

The first two I want to talk about first, obviously, because you'll want to get started the sooner the better — because they involve outside entities. First is the Certificate of State Approval. Your state's chief justice, court administrator, or representative must sign off on your project. We included a sample form in our application guide, and it's also available on SJI's website. They need to sign off on your project before you can submit, so you want to get that started as soon as you can.

Also, if your project involves outside partners, don't wait until the last minute to get those letters of support or MOUs if needed. SJI wants to see that your collaborators, if you have them, are as committed to the project as you are. Those letters of support are important. I always recommend, like I said, if there is someone other than yourself involved in your project, reach out to them early — and if you have to, often. None of us likes to be a nag, but sometimes we do have to be persistent to get the things that we need. You don't want to approach someone at the last minute saying, “Oh hey, by the way, I need this from you.” Getting that line of communication open early is always important. It just saves your sanity; it saves your relationships. I can go on and on, but I won't.

You'll also need a one-page abstract, a robust program narrative that is up to 25 pages, and a detailed budget and budget narrative. If you haven't already, you can start roughing out some key points that you'll want your project to cover. We all have various ways of working when it comes to starting and implementing a project, so I'm not going to tell you how to do it, but I can almost guarantee that successful grant applicants don't just start writing a proposal in Word. They have rough drafts. They probably have several rough drafts. You want to start brainstorming, bulleting out the high-level needs that you're trying to address.

Project Timeline

Shannon Day:
Another thing I recommend, and that they require, is a project timeline. I recommend a timeline for the grant application as well. That's obviously not required for this application, but it really helps for you to keep organized. Also, if you're working with outside agencies, I like to work backwards. If you have a grant application timeline, circle your deadline and work backwards from that. For your project timeline

that is a required component, work backwards from the closeout date — and again, it will be either 36 months or 12 months. You want to figure out who's doing what, when. That's what the project timeline will be.

Unallowable Costs

Shannon Day:
Here we have some unallowable costs. I wanted to draw attention to this because it's a common pitfall with SJI — trying to fund basic court services in your application. SJI is pretty firm here. Their grants are meant to supplement, improve, and innovate, not to replace your operating budget. You generally can't use funds for day-to-day staff, standard equipment, maintenance, internet service, et cetera. It's on your screen; I don't need to read it to you.

If you're not sure if a part of your budget in your project may fall into this category, SJI encourages you to reach out to them directly to discuss. SJI is incredibly responsive, so reach out to them and talk to them about your project. I also added a little asterisk next to construction, because there may be an exception for remodeling existing facilities to demonstrate new architectural or technological techniques, or to provide temporary facilities for new personnel or personnel involved in a demonstration or experimental program that is funded through SJI.

When planning your project, just always keep innovation in mind. That's what these grants are really for.

Review Parameters

Shannon Day:
I also mentioned each grant has unique application requirements. They also have some unique review parameters, so when SJI is reviewing applications, they are checking certain parameters. These can all be found in the official application guidance. I am not going to bore you with them. But generally, across all the project categories, SJI considers: whether you're an eligible entity; whether financial assistance is available from other sources for your project; the diversity of the subject matter and geographic diversity; the level and nature of the match that will be provided; the reasonableness of the proposed budget; the extent to which the proposed project would also benefit the federal courts or help other state or local courts enforce federal constitutional and legislative requirements; and the level of appropriations available to SJI. They may not have all the funds that they need to fund all the projects they want to fund. All of these things are considered when they're reviewing your application.

What a Win Looks Like: Recently Awarded Projects

Shannon Day:
What does a win look like? I want to close out today with a few examples of awarded projects to illustrate the depth and breadth of these grants.

First off, Four Corners Group, Inc., in partnership with the Cobb County, Georgia, Juvenile Court, is deploying an intensive, multi-tiered support system that engages youth while in custody and reintegrates them into the school system to promote behavioral change and academic progression. This is such a great example of cross-sector collaboration with nonprofits, a government entity, and educational institutions.

Next, in Washington County, Oregon, they're establishing a framework that will lead to positive outcomes for probation and justice-involved youth through the TA grants.

Finally, the National Association of Women Judges is developing training on AI for courts, focused on helping self-represented litigants, or SRLs. Training offered at conferences and online covers AI tools that will enhance judicial efficiency, detect falsified evidence, and support SRLs.

As I mentioned earlier, SJI provides so many valuable resources on its site, including past awarded projects. You can go there and look to see who's gotten what over the years. Reviewing awarded projects is incredibly helpful to inform your own projects and steer your ship, so to speak.

Free SJI Application Workbook

Shannon Day:
Again, as Ashley mentioned, to hopefully get your project onto future win slides like the previous, we recommend starting with our free eligibility and proposal workbook. It will help you brainstorm your narrative. As I've mentioned, don't just start writing. This tool will help you keep yourself organized — you can hit one section and then hit the next section another day. It's really helping you brainstorm your narrative, helping you plan out your budget, before you even log into SJI's grant portal. And I don't think I mentioned their grant portal, but they do have their very own grant portal. It is wonderful, so you can also register for that. But I don't think you even want to do that until you start planning out your project. That's what this workbook will hopefully help you accomplish. With that, I will turn it back over to Ashley, and hopefully we have some questions.

Grants Office Services

Ashley Schultz:
Thanks, Shannon. Yes, I do — I have six questions for you already. Folks in the audience, if you have additional questions, bottom right-hand corner of your screen, look for that Q&A button. I'm just going

to give Shannon a quick second to grab a glass of water, and talk about how Grants Office can help you along the way.

On the Federal Funding Landscape

Ashley Schultz:
First and foremost, I just want to quickly call your attention to what is happening with the U.S. federal budget. SJI, as Shannon noted, is not a federal government department, but it is a federal entity. They are impacted by some of the changes that we've been seeing. There's quite a bit of discourse surrounding how and when the U.S. government is providing grants right now. Lots of conflicting information coming out of the White House, Congress, cabinet, et cetera. It's pretty challenging to keep track of.

If you haven't already done so, I encourage you to check out our website under the Guidance for Grant Seekers tab, where we have a series of 5-minute videos on the U.S. federal budget. What has passed, what has not passed, how much funding is available, what changes are we seeing in the grant funding landscape — all of those videos are available for you right now on demand, on our website.

Grant Writing and Editing Services

Ashley Schultz:
I also want to call out Grants Office's grant writing and editing services that I referred to at the beginning of today's event. Our team here, filled with folks just like Shannon, has a 25-year reputation across both the U.S. and Canada in proposal development work. We help organizations just like yourself plan out and then articulate your project in a way that's really going to speak to SJI's or some other funder's goals and objectives.

If you followed along with today's session and you plan to apply to the SJI grant, but you feel like you're going to need some help to get across the finish line, please don't hesitate to reach out. We have full proposal development and writing — which means for SJI, you come to us with a general idea of your project and an overview of what you'll need to include in your budget, and we'll get you a grant writer who can translate all those ideas into a competitive narrative so that you can then go and submit inside SJI's portal.

In a nutshell, that essentially looks like you giving us an email at grantwriting@grantsoffice.com. You want to come to that email having already read and worked through most of the questions in that workbook that Shannon mentioned. You don't need to have full sentences; you don't need to have beautiful prose for all the prompts. But what we do ask is that you've given each component of your project a fair deal of thought. What are you going to do? Where will your project take place? What do you need to purchase to make that all happen? What's that all going to cost? Those types of things.

From there, you'll meet with Shannon or another member of our team to talk about your project goals and your development needs. If you contract with us for writing, we'll get you connected to a writer who's going to start putting pen to paper on your behalf. We try to give at least two opportunities to you to review those drafts and provide feedback to make sure we've really captured your organization's goals and your mission correctly. As you work towards that deadline, we give you all the application materials at the end so that you can upload them into the portal and then click submit. If this is something that you're interested in, please contact us at grantwriting@grantsoffice.com to get started.

Other Grants Office Services

Ashley Schultz:
If you followed along with today's event but you just don't think SJI is right for you, that's also okay. I'll call your attention to other Grants Office services that are available to you. We have research and consultation services that allow you to sit down with a consultant just like Shannon, discuss your upcoming projects, and then be provided with a list of state, federal, and foundation grants — maybe SJI, maybe some other ones — that would best support those initiatives. We also have project-building services that allow you to sit down and build out a competitive application to an entirely different program.

Last but certainly not least, we have our subscription service, Grants Office Communities, which gives you access to our database of more than 26,000 state, federal, and foundation grants, so that you can do that research and project building all on your own, inside of a platform that was designed by the team here at Grants Office — for grants people, by grants people. Grants Office Communities always offers a free two-week trial, so if you haven't gone over to check that out yet, I definitely encourage you to do so.

Q&A Session

Ashley Schultz:
With that, Shannon, I'm going to pass things over with a couple of questions for you.

Q1: Is there any benefit to applying earlier or later in the SJI quarterly cycle?

Ashley Schultz:
The first question came in when you were talking about SJI just in general, and you mentioned that there were four deadlines. Is there any benefit to getting in earlier or later — any benefit to any of those four dates across the year?

Shannon Day:
No, I don't think so. As I mentioned, it's really what your workload looks like. I don't think that SJI runs out of money by November. They review the applications quarterly, and they basically plan their budget — as far as I know. I don't want to speak for SJI, but I don't think there's really a benefit of getting it in February versus August.

Ashley Schultz:
Great. Thank you. SJI, if you're in the crowd, please let us know!

Q2: Can tribal courts and local courts apply?

Ashley Schultz:
Another question about eligibility: can tribal courts apply? And I also got a similar question — can local courts apply?

Shannon Day:
Local courts can. Unfortunately, tribal courts cannot. SJI is prohibited from awarding grants to federal, tribal, and international courts. But yes, local courts can apply. I do want to mention: if you are a tribal court, there are other grants out there for you. As Ashley mentioned, SJI isn't the only grant — it's just an awesome grant. There are other options for you if you're a tribal court.

Q3: Are security cameras an eligible expense?

Ashley Schultz:
I got a couple of questions, Shannon, about allowable expenses. They came in while you were talking about the unallowable expenses, and then also while you were talking about the priority areas. I'm just going to click back to the slide really quick so folks can reference it while you're speaking. The first question was: are security cameras an eligible expense?

Shannon Day:
That's kind of a tough one. My first answer is no, but it's not a hard no. Security cameras generally fall under basic court services because nearly every courthouse has them. Now, if they are part of an innovative solution — again, I mentioned keeping that word innovation in mind — if they are part of an innovative solution or innovative technology, as you see under Transforming Courts, they may be. So that's a little bit of a gray area. I would recommend talking to SJI about it. Not just “hey, we need cameras” — obviously they're going to say no. But if those cameras are part of an innovative project — for example, utilizing AI to track the number of people in and out of the courthouse — I'm just spitballing here. So it's a no, but basically...

Q4: Where is the line on cybersecurity and other technology?

Ashley Schultz:
Well, I do have a second part I didn't tell you, so I have a second part that I think may kind of fall into what you just said. The other questions are about cybersecurity solutions, and then there's another question more generally about mass notification systems, gunshot detection systems — other technology. Where is that line, Shannon, of software and hardware, of innovation versus day-to-day?

Shannon Day:
That's the hard part. Something that I think would be innovative, SJI may not. They may say, “yeah, we see that in courthouses all the time.” So I hate to keep giving people homework, but reach out to SJI and talk to them about it. But before you do that, plan out your projects so you can talk to them. Like I said, you don't want to call them up and say, “hey, we need a notification system because we want to keep our people safe.” Yeah, everyone wants to keep their people safe. But is that mass notification system part of an overall strategy? Is it part of an innovation for the entire courthouse, for example? You don't want to think small. You don't want to think, “hey, we need locks on our doors.” Okay, why? Reach out to SJI, talk to them, get their input on what they consider innovative versus just your basic day-to-day court services.

Ashley Schultz:
Sure. Thank you. I will add a little editorial piece here as well: it doesn't have to be all or nothing, right? You can always ask — if you have a several-hundred-thousand-dollar security camera project, you can really tie 10% of that purchase to innovation. Then group it accordingly and only ask SJI for that 10%. You can get creative, and through those dialogues with SJI, you can navigate your way to something that both parties find agreeable.

Shannon Day:
Absolutely.

Q5: Can a single court apply for a curriculum grant for its own education?

Ashley Schultz:
Thanks, Shannon. The last question I have: can a court apply for a curriculum grant for their own education? The example that you gave kind of impacted multiple courts, so this question was just: can a singular court do that for their own purposes?

Shannon Day:
Absolutely.

Closing

Ashley Schultz:
Wonderful. Thank you very much, Shannon, for all of that information, and thanks to all of you for hanging out here with us for an extra 6 minutes to answer those questions. Again, if you need help with SJI, please don't hesitate to contact us: grantwriting@grantsoffice.com. For all other free grant-seeker resources, head over to our website. Thanks very much for joining us, folks, and we hope to see you on another event.

— End of Transcript —

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