

An Introduction to the State Justice Institute

Richard Van Duizend

Founded by Congress more than a decade ago, the State Justice Institute (SJI) is charged with the unique mission of fostering innovations in judicial administration that would improve the quality of justice in state courts throughout the United States. Yet, despite its origin in a federal statute and its accomplishments, many judges remain unaware of its mission, its organizational structure, and its ability to assist courts and judges. For those unfamiliar with SJI, this essay seeks to introduce you to its most important features. For those who already are aware of SJI and some of its work, this essay seeks to enhance your understanding and to promote your interaction with us.

SJI is the only federally-funded grant program focused solely on improving the administration of justice in the state courts. It was established by the State Justice Institute Act of 1984, 42 U.S.C. § 10701 *et seq.*, but it is not a federal agency. Rather, SJI is a non-profit corporation governed by a board of directors whose members are appointed by the President and confirmed by the United States Senate. By law, the board must include six state court judges, a state court administrator, and four public members, no more than two of whom may belong to the same political party. The judicial and state court administrator members must be selected from a list submitted to the President by the Conference of Chief Justices. Thus, to paraphrase Lincoln, SJI is of the state courts, by the state courts, and for the state courts.

The Institute's efficient operation and responsiveness to the most critical needs of state courts of all types (civil, criminal, juvenile, family, probate, and appellate) and at all levels distinguish it from most federal grant agencies. Since it became operational in 1987, SJI has awarded more than \$100 million to sup-

port more than 1,100 projects. Courts in every state have received at least one SJI grant. Other types of grantees include national court support organizations, such as the National Center for State Courts; national court education organizations, including the National Judicial College and American Academy of Judicial Education; national and state court membership organizations (such as the National Council of Juvenile and Family Court Judges and the National Association for Court Management); universities; bar associations and other non-profit groups; and individuals.

SJI operates four separate grant programs. Its primary program is the annual project grant cycle to support innovative research, evaluation, educational, demonstration, and information sharing projects. Projects grants may be for up to \$200,000, although award amounts over \$150,000 are rare.

This cycle begins with the submission of "concept papers" in late November. A concept paper is a statement of the need for a project, the benefits it would provide to the courts, the approach that would be taken, the products that would be produced, and a line-item budget. Each concept paper may be up to eight pages, double-spaced. Nearly 200 were submitted this year. The papers are reviewed and summarized by SJI staff, and are then considered by the board at a meeting in early March. Projects requiring less than \$40,000 that are fully and clearly described in the concept paper can be approved for award at that time. Applicants requesting larger grants may be invited to submit full applications (up to twenty-five double-spaced pages) for more complex, innovative programs that demonstrate the potential for assisting or providing a model for state courts around the country. Those applications are due in mid-May and are considered by the board for award at the end of July.

There are three other SJI grant programs — technical assistance, curriculum adaptation, and scholarship. These are for smaller grants than are provided under the project grant program.

Under the technical assistance grant program, awards of up to \$30,000 can be made to local courts or state court systems to enable them to obtain consultant expertise to diagnose a critical problem affecting a court and to recommend a solution. Like all SJI grants to state and local courts and other units of government, technical assistance grants require applicants to provide matching support equal to at least fifty percent of the amount requested; the match may be in cash or may be in-kind assistance (*e.g.*, the time of judges and court staff devoted to the project). The technical assistance grant program operates quarterly. All that is required are a letter explaining the project in sufficient detail, a budget, and the concurrence of the state's chief justice or the chief justice's designee. Generally, ten to fifteen requests are received and three to four awards are made each quarter.

Curriculum adaptation grants of up to \$20,000 may be awarded to a court or state court system to modify and test for local use, a model curriculum developed under an SJI grant. Curriculum adaptation grant requests may be submitted at any time. As with technical assistance grants, only a sufficiently detailed letter, a budget, and the state chief justice's concurrence form are required.

The Institute also awards scholarships of up to \$1,500 to enable judges and court managers to attend out-of-state educational programs. The scholarship funds are to be used for airfare and tuition. Scholarship applications and concurrence forms may be submitted during specified sixty-day periods each quarter for educational programs beginning during the following quarter. For programs to occur between July 1

and September 30, 1999, for example, applications must be submitted between April 1 and June 1, 1999. They are approved primarily on a first come-first served basis.

Among the projects supported by recent SJI grants are:

— Development of a curriculum on children in adult courts by the National Judicial College (Judge Jeffrey Rosinek, former AJA President, was instrumental in the development of this project);

— Several projects to help courts cope with the growing number of self-represented litigants, including using the Internet to deliver forms and instructions to pro se litigants in New Mexico, evaluating different types of courthouse assistance offices in Idaho, and convening the National Conference on Unrepresented Litigants in Court (under a grant to the American Judicature Society);

— Documentation and analysis of the use of electronic filing in state courts by the Rand Corporation;

— Presentation of the National Symposium on the Future of Judicial Branch Education, scheduled for October 7-9, 1999, in St. Louis, by the National Association of State Judicial

Educators and a coalition of other court organizations; and

— Continued support for the National Center for State Courts' Technology Information Exchange Service and Court Information Service.

The fruits of SJI-funded research projects are available to you in many ways. SJI-designated libraries (usually your state supreme court's library) exist in 48 states, the District of Columbia, Puerto Rico and the Virgin Islands. Each of these libraries – as well as the National Center for State Courts, the American Judicature Society, the National Judicial College and the JERITT project at Michigan State University – receive a copy of each product of SJI grants, including written reports, articles, books, manuals, videos, computer programs and CD-ROM's. A list of all grants funded by SJI is available on the SJI web site. For additional information about SJI, including fact sheets describing the procedures for each program, the necessary forms, the full grant guideline book as printed in the Federal Register, and a list of grants, check the SJI website at <http://www.statejustice.org>. Or, if you're among the many who still prefer to talk to a real person, please feel free to

call David I. Tevelin, SJI's executive director, at 703-684-6100, extension 214.



Richard Van Duizend served as deputy director and chief of the program division of the State Justice Institute from 1987 until April 1999. Before joining SJI in February 1987, he served as a senior staff attorney with the National Center for State Courts and was director of its Washington project office. He also has served as a project attorney with the American Bar Association and on the staffs of the National Institute of Justice, the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention, and the Pima County, Arizona, Public Defender's office. Mr. Van Duizend earned his J.D. and A.B. degrees from Harvard University.

For more information about the State Justice Institute...

SJI-designated libraries exist in 48 states, the District of Columbia, Puerto Rico and the Virgin Islands, as well as at the National Center for State Courts, the American Judicature Society, the National Judicial College and the JERITT project at Michigan State University. All SJI-funded grant products since 1991 have been sent to every in-state library. The location and contact person for each library can be found in Appendix II of the SJI's 1999 Grant Guideline, which can be downloaded via SJI's web site.

SJI's web site (<http://www.statejustice.org>) includes a list of all non-scholarship grants awarded by SJI since 1987. Projects are listed chronologically and by special interest categories. Contact persons are listed for each grant project. Also included at the web site are SJI's report of its first ten years, *Improving the Quality of American Justice, 1987-1997*, grant guideline and application forms, and the quarterly *SJI News*, which provides a convenient eight-page summary of recent SJI grants and projects.

The JERITT web site (<http://jeritt.msu.edu>) contains a searchable database that includes summaries of more than 900 SJI grant products. JERITT, the Judicial Education Reference, Information and Technical Transfer Project, is a national clearinghouse of information about judicial branch education that SJI has supported since its inception in 1989. Although the web site focuses on judicial education, the products of almost every SJI grant are summarized on the site, regardless of topic. JERITT can also be reached by phone (517-333-8603) or by fax (517-432-3965).

SJI staff can be of assistance in providing information to you. In addition to Executive Director David Tevelin, a full staff listing is provided at the web site, along with each staff member's extension number. Program managers are listed on the web site directory, along with their areas of expertise (e.g., dispute resolution, court management, domestic violence, scholarships, etc.), so that you can make contact directly with the staff member most likely to have the information you're seeking. A staff directory is included on the SJI web site. Or, if you're not a web searcher, just call SJI at 1-703-684-6100 and follow the prompts, or contact extension 200 for help.