



Grant Funding for Public Defense:

Strategies for Getting Started



Office of the State
Public Defender

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Introduction

Whether you are considering opening a new public defender office, establishing a managed assigned counsel system, or adding an innovative program to an existing defender system, this guide is a primer for identifying supplemental grant funding for indigent defense improvements in your county. For additional resources on funding public defense services, please see OSPD's [*Beyond the General Fund: Expanding County Funding Strategies for Public Defense*](#).



**Office of the State
Public Defender**

What makes a successful grant application

1	Align with the funder's goals	• Mirror the grant's language and priorities in your proposal. • Show how your program advances their mission.
2	Build in a data component	• Include evaluation and data collection from the outset, structuring the plan with overall goals in mind.
3	Tell a compelling story	• Combine data with narrative. • Show the human impact of your program alongside the numbers.
4	Start small, scale up	• Consider pilot programs or smaller scope projects to start. • Use early results as proof of concept for larger applications.
5	Plan for sustainability	• Address how the program will continue beyond the grant period.
6	Leverage partnerships	• Propose collaboration with universities, research agencies, and/or community-based organizations to strengthen your application.

1. Align with the funder's goals

Grant applications are often awarded points and "scored" using criteria that specifically track the requirements and goals of the grant Request for Proposals (RFP). Grant writers should closely track any questions/requirements in the materials outlining the funding opportunity and mirror the grant's language and priorities in the proposal. This allows for easier, and more successful, scoring.

2. Build in a data component

Applicants should plan on data collection and program evaluation from the beginning. Not only are strong data and reporting plans effective in the application process, harnessing this data can create pathways for future sustainable funding beyond the grant period.

Partnering on data collection and evaluation

Consider partnering with a local university or a non-profit research organization for assistance with the evaluation and data collection components of your project. Research organizations that have previously engaged in work relevant to public defense include:

- [California Policy Lab](#)
- [Center for Justice Innovation](#)
- [National Institute for Criminal Justice Reform \(NICJR\)](#)
- [RAND](#)
- [Vera Institute](#)

3. Tell a compelling story

A strong application tells a compelling story - clearly laying out the problem at hand and presenting a thoughtful, well-defined response to that need. This includes a description of the scale of the problem, who is impacted, and why your proposed project is uniquely poised to be effective. The most effective proposals combine quantitative data with individual narratives to tell the story of the project.

Finding data to support your story

[United States Census Bureau QuickFacts](#): Provides general population data at the county level.

- This population data can be used in grant applications to identify racial disparities, economic status, veterans, or individuals with language barriers within a given jurisdiction.

[Vera Institute of Justice](#): Offers county-level data on incarceration rates (including percentage of jail population that is held pretrial or has mental health needs), racial demographic statistics, and budget information.

- Grant applicants can use this research to contextualize local challenges within statewide trends and to identify particular needs within a county, such as serving those with mental health challenges.

[Judicial Council Court Statistics Report](#): Provides annual data on superior court filings and dispositions by county.

- This resource is useful to demonstrate potential scope and/or impact via the number of cases handled within a jurisdiction. This resource also identifies how many jury trials are litigated, what percentage of cases settle within a county, and how quickly cases resolve.

4. Start small, scale up

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Public defender offices new to grant writing should consider starting with a focused, smaller scope project. Such a pilot project may present a lighter lift to launch and may only require smaller grant awards to get off the ground. Pilot projects can then function as “proof of concept”; data on performance and outcomes gathered from an initial pilot can help secure larger, longer-term funding down the road.

[Public defense pilot projects from other jurisdictions](#) may provide some inspiration for proposals relevant to your clients and community.

5. Plan for sustainability

Many funding applications require information on how a project will continue after all awarded funds are spent. Grant writers should take that opportunity to discuss potential future funding sources for the program and possible “match” funding from your county.

6. Leverage partnerships

Collaborating with other county agencies and community-based organizations can be critical to the success of your project. Many funders only fund non-profits and non-governmental organizations, so it may be beneficial to consider collaborative partnerships.

Below are examples of California counties that have created indigent defense partnerships:

- Contra Costa County established the [Holistic Intervention Partnership \(HIP\)](#), a collaboration between the public defender’s office, other county agencies, and community-based organizations. HIP operates out of the public defender’s office and provides holistic services to indigent defense clients.
- The [BRIDGE Foundation](#) of Santa Cruz County is a non-profit that provides support to adults and children impacted by criminal legal system involvement. The BRIDGE Fund pays for things that public defender clients need to engage in successful rehabilitation, recovery, and reentry.
- Yolo County Public Defender’s office founded [CARES](#), a 501(c)(3) non-profit that operates with local donations and grant funding to provide support for indigent defense clients.

California grants

Board of State Community Corrections (BSCC)

The [Board of State and Community Corrections](#) is a California agency responsible for supporting county adult and juvenile systems through oversight, technical assistance, and administration of grants. The [Corrections Planning and Grant Programs](#) division of the BSCC

manages and distributes approximately \$400 million annually in grant funding to address public health and safety needs, including reentry, rehabilitation, and system improvement.

Tip: You can review the local evaluation plans of BSCC award grantees to get an idea of what projects BSCC has funded. You can also speak with your county leadership to review other successful BSCC grant applications from your county.

Examples of BSCC grants

Byrne JAG Grant Program: The Edward Byrne Memorial Justice Assistance (Byrne JAG) Grant Program is a federal program providing funding in two ways: 1) directly to jurisdictions and 2) through a competitive grant process. In California, the competitive process is administered by the BSCC. The competitive grant runs on a three-year cycle. In the 2022 grant cycle, public defender offices received over \$18 million of the \$47 million awarded to California counties. Seven public defender offices received awards ranging from \$660,000 to \$6,000,000 and are using the funds for holistic defense, early representation, and specialty courts in both adult and juvenile units.

It is important to note that each county can only submit a single application each grant cycle, so coordination with county leadership is critical.

BSCC anticipates releasing the next Request for Proposals (RFP) for Byrne JAG funds in late 2026. Additional information and sign-up for BSCC funding opportunity alerts can be found on the [BSCC Website](#).

Note: *There are two streams of Byrne JAG funding. The one described above is the competitive Byrne JAG grant process which differs from the local formula Byrne JAG program. Under the local Byrne JAG program, funds are allocated directly to eligible cities and counties annually based on a federal formula that considers population and crime data. The county or city government then controls the funds and determines spending priorities.*

Below are some publicly available examples of successful projects:

[Byrne JAG 2023 Award Grantee Project Summaries](#)

[Byrne JAG 2019 Award Grantee Project Summaries](#)

[Contra Costa Byrne JAG Application](#)

[Prop 47 Grant Program](#): This grant program is available to public agencies providing mental health services, substance use disorder treatment, and diversion programs for those involved with the criminal legal system.

Operating on a four-year cycle, the Prop 47 Grant application period typically opens from May to June. The 2025 grant cycle allowed use of grant funds for treatment of individuals charged under Health and Safety Code § 11395(d)(1), the new "Prop 36."

Funded public defense-related projects have included:

- Contra Costa County Public Defender: \$5,999,999 -- holistic defense to improve outcomes and housing options for clients charged with low level offenses.
- Monterey County Public Defender: \$8,000,000 -- early intervention for clients with mental health and substance use disorders.
- Santa Barbara County Public Defender: \$5,999,289 -- in collaboration with Behavioral Health -- to support diversion for clients with mental health and substance use disorders.
- Ventura County Public Defender: \$7,317,598 --in collaboration with the District Attorney's Office and the Court -- to support diversion for clients with mental health and substance use disorders.

Below are some publicly available examples of successful projects:

[Past Prop 47 Reports, RFPs, and Local Evaluations](#)

[Prop 47 Cohort 5 Award Grantee Project Summaries](#)

[Prop 47 Cohort 4 Award Grantee Project Summaries](#)

[Prop 47 Cohort 3 Award Grantee Project Summaries](#)

[Los Angeles County - Prop 47 Grant Application](#)

[Prop 64 Public Health and Safety Grant Program](#): This grant funds local programming to address public health and safety associated with the implementation of the Control, Regulate and Tax Adult Use of Marijuana Act. The most recent cohort awarded \$125 million to California counties, with up to \$1 million to small counties, \$4.5

California grants

Examples of BSCC grants (continued)

million to medium sized counties, and up to \$6 million for large counties. Up to two proposals can be submitted from different lead agencies within a county. Although public defender agencies have not typically applied for this grant, [allowable uses](#) of funds dovetail with holistic defense priorities and include programs which improve public health, assist with youth development, or fund youth prevention and intervention.

Below are some publicly available examples of successful projects:

[Prop 64 Cohort 3 Award Grantee Project Summaries](#)

[Prop 64 Cohort 2 Award Grantee Project Summaries](#)

[Prop 64 Cohort 3 Reports and Evaluation Plans](#)

Office of the State Public Defender

In 2022, the legislature passed [Senate Bill 1117](#), authorizing the Office of the State Public Defender to administer and award indigent defense grants in California. OSPD subsequently distributed the following one-time grants:

- 2024 [Racial Justice Act for All Implementation Grant](#): \$2 million to public defense providers to assist with representing clients in Racial Justice Act claims.
- 2025 [Holistic Defense Grant](#): \$14 million to public defense providers for social workers and staff to address client needs beyond their criminal cases.
- 2026 [Rural Public Defender Startup Grant](#): \$5 million to four rural counties to improve their public defense systems.

To see any current California public defense grants, visit the [OSPD website](#).

Additionally, [Grants.ca.gov](#) is a portal for California grants.

Federal grants

Before applying for federal funding, public defense offices should consider whether current federal funding priorities and reporting requirements align with their office goals. For those offices interested in exploring federal grants, forecasted notices of grants are published on each federal agency's website.

Federal agencies that have previously disbursed grants impacting public defense and public defense clients include: [Office of Justice Programs \(OJP\)](#), [Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention \(OJJDP\)](#), and [Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration \(SAMHSA\)](#)¹.

1. Behavioral health is typically the lead grant recipient of SAMHSA funds. A public defense office would need to partner with their county's behavioral health department to apply for these funds. The public defender office would then serve as a grant subrecipient, acting as a referral source, diversion partner, or other collaborator with behavioral health.

Federal grants (continued)

Additional resources on federal grants include:

[Accessing Federal Grants, Foundation Funds, and Other Supplemental Resources: A Toolkit for Public Defenders](#): This publication was created by the National Legal Aid & Defender Association and offers step-by-step help in planning capacity building projects, locating funding, applying for grants, and managing awards.

[Funding Opportunities for Holistic Defense: A Presentation at the NLADA Community-Oriented Defender Network Conference](#): This slide deck from a 2017 presentation includes resources and tips for indigent defense leaders looking for ways to secure funding from federal sources.

[Grants.gov](#): This site is a centralized database and search engine for federal grant funding opportunities.

[Rulo Strategies Federal Funding Guide](#): Each week during the federal funding season, Rulo Strategies publishes a federal funding guide featuring the latest opportunities. This free resource provides an overview of active programs, eligibility criteria, and strategic insights to help jurisdictions identify opportunities that align with their priorities and capacity.

Helpful Tips for Federal Grants

Setting up relevant accounts

The process to set up a grants.gov account can be particularly difficult because the EIN number for the public defender office must be distinct from the county's overall EIN number.

Necessary steps for federal grant applications:

1. Register your office with SAM.gov:
 - Go to [secure.login.gov/](#) to create an account and obtain a Unique Entity Identifier (UEI).
 - SAM registration must be renewed annually. Make sure to register with an evergreen email address that will be monitored regularly for registration updates.
 - Approval for registration can take 7-10 business days.
2. Create your login at Grants.gov:
 - Go to the [registration page](#).
 - Create a Grants.gov account with the same email address used for SAM.gov.
 - Add a profile with Grants.gov using the UEI obtained from SAM.gov.

For additional information, see the [Grants.gov Quick Start Guide](#) and [Grants.gov's Youtube Channel](#) for videos on "How to Register with Grants.gov" and "How to Search for a Federal Grant".

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Note: *Given the number of approvals required, it can take longer than a month to complete this registration process, which is often longer than a grant application window is open. Consider completing this process well in advance of any upcoming grant application cycles and keeping the account active by renewing annually.*

Be aware of reporting requirements

Federal grants have ongoing, detailed reporting requirements over the life of a grant. This required financial and programmatic reporting often takes considerable staff time and resources to accomplish and should be considered before applying for any federal award.

Private and community foundations

Many private and community foundations have funding priorities that align with the work of public defense. In most instances, however, these foundations will not fund a government agency directly. Public defender offices may consider partnering with a local community-based organization or nonprofit to apply for funding, proposing a collaboration between the agencies. Such collaboration could take the form of non-profit staff embedded within a public defender office to provide supports and services, operating under an MOU to protect client confidentiality. For examples of such partnerships, see the [Leverage Partnerships](#) on page 5.

Note on health equity and public defense: Private foundations funding public health and health disparity reduction initiatives may present a promising match for public defense providers. Health equity driven initiatives seek to ensure everyone has the same opportunity to be healthy, regardless of race, ethnicity, education level, gender identity, sexual orientation, employment status, income, neighborhood, or disability. In many cases, these goals and target populations can be served through innovative public defense initiatives, such as holistic defense models, juvenile programs aimed at reducing Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACES), and projects supporting diversion from the criminal legal system.

Community foundations

Building a relationship with a local community foundation may create opportunities for public defender offices to provide additional services, like clean slate or emergency funds for clients. A current list of the 39 California community foundations can be found [here](#).

Private and community foundations

Private foundations

Private foundations

The following organizations have previously invited proposals that could potentially align with indigent defense priorities²:

California Health Care Foundation

This foundation is an independent, nonprofit philanthropy focused on health and access to care for low-income Californians.

Priority areas for funding include: Health equity, CalAIM in Focus.

How to apply for funding opportunities: Most of the foundation's grants are solicited or awarded through competitive RFPs. The organization also accepts letters of inquiry for unsolicited requests that align with their strategic goals. Current RFPs can be found [here](#).

California Wellness Foundation

This foundation awards grants to promote health equity, justice, and advocacy for communities and individuals whose lives and wellness are too often determined by their race, income, immigration status, or where they live.

Priority areas for funding include: Community well-being, equity in access, economic security and dignity.

How to apply for funding opportunities: While the organization is not accepting unsolicited grants at the time of publication, more information and a means to connect with the foundation's grant management team can be found [here](#).

Robert Wood Johnson Foundation

This foundation funds research and initiatives focused on achieving health equity.

Priority areas for funding include: Public and community health, healthy children and families, social determinants of health.

How to apply for funding opportunities: The foundation posts competitive calls for proposals that define the challenge they wish to address, the activities it will support, and eligibility criteria. The organization also provides funding opportunities through open calls for ideas, challenges and prize competitions, and, in some cases, unsolicited direct proposals that support specific programmatic objectives. Active funding opportunities can be found [here](#).

Technical Assistance

The [Indigent Defense Improvement Division at OSPD](#) is available to provide resources and technical assistance to defense offices and stakeholders applying for non-OSPD indigent defense grants. Contact the Indigent Defense Improvement Division's Capacity Building team at: capacitybuilding@ospd.ca.gov.

Appendix

Public defense pilot programs

The following defense models have yielded demonstrated improvements in client and system outcomes in multiple jurisdictions. They are offered here as possible starting points for county-specific proposals to strengthen indigent defense.

**Please note this appendix specifically highlights programs outside of California. For information about similar programs within California, please reach out to OSPD.*

Early representation units

Early representation teams can provide essential information to the court on a client's caretaking responsibilities, health concerns, or pressing employment issues. When defense teams can obtain and present information at the first court appearance, judges are able to make informed decisions regarding release, leading to more just outcomes.³

Without early representation, indigent clients face longer pre-trial detention, which can result in loss of housing and income, harm to families and children, and a waste of county resources.⁴ Longer pretrial detention is also associated with higher conviction rates and longer sentences.⁵

Examples:

- The [Defender Association of Philadelphia's](#) bail advocate program reduced racial disparity in pretrial detention and increased public safety by reducing the rate of bail violations and new arrests.⁶
- The [Bronx Defenders](#) Early Defense team has a 24-hour hotline and walk-in services to offer legal advice, help navigate CPS investigations, and provide resource referrals.
- The [Cook County Public Defender's](#) Arrest Hotline operates 365 days a year, 24 hours a day, taking calls and providing legal representation for people being detained by law enforcement anywhere in Cook County.

Integrating social workers into defense teams

Social workers bring valuable expertise in identifying and connecting clients to relevant support services—an especially powerful tool in rural areas where options are limited and rarely publicized.⁷ Embedding social workers in public defense offices can have multiple benefits, including reducing attorney workload, improving client outcomes, and reducing rates of incarceration and sentence lengths.⁸

3. The Constitution Project National Right to Counsel Committee. Don't I Need a Lawyer? Pretrial Justice and the Right to Counsel at First Judicial Bail Hearing. The Constitution Project, page 31, March 2015, found [here](#).

4. Worden, Shteynberg, Morgan, and Davies. The Impact of Counsel at First Appearance on Pretrial Release in Felony Arraignments: The Case of Rural Jurisdictions. Deason Criminal Justice Reform Center, Southern Methodist University, January 2020, found [here](#).

5. Brett Fischer et al. Providing Early Legal Counsel Reduces Jail Time and Improves Case Outcomes. California Policy Lab. June 2023, found [here](#). Megan Stevenson & Sandra G. Mayson. Pretrial Detention and Bail. Faculty Scholarship at Penn Carey Law, 2017.

6. Paul Heaton. Enhanced Public Defense Improves Pretrial Outcomes and Reduces Racial Disparities. Indiana Law Journal. Volume. 96: 701. 2021, found [here](#).

7. Ibid

8. Matei, Hussemann and Siegel. Assessing a Social Worker Model of Public Defense. Urban Institute. 2021, found [here](#).

Examples:

- [The Bronx Defenders](#) incorporates social workers who partner with attorneys to craft defense strategies, co-author mitigation and sentencing memos, and advocate in court.
- [Colorado State Public Defender](#) incorporates social workers into defense teams to investigate clients' life histories, provide mitigation advocacy, and develop sentencing plans that improve client outcomes beyond the immediate case.
- The [Michigan Indigent Defense Commission](#) piloted the Social Worker Defender Project which pairs attorneys with social workers to develop alternative sentencing plans for clients. The Project produced a [program manual](#) to help other jurisdictions replicate the program.

Family defense

Embedding parent-defense dependency lawyers within public defender offices can reduce family separation and ensure better outcomes across criminal and dependency proceedings.⁹ Defenders work in tandem with dependency lawyers to leverage information and services across cases. Likewise, embedded parent defense attorneys access training, litigation preparation and resources of the public defender office to enhance representation in dependency proceedings.

Examples:

- The [Harris County Public Defender's Office](#) uses a full-time attorney to specialize in parent representation in dependency cases.
- The [Bronx Defenders, Neighborhood Defender Service and Brooklyn Defender Service](#) use in-house representation for parents facing family separation in dependency cases.

Homeless outreach

Homeless outreach programs allow public defender offices to connect with the unhoused community and provide resources that help to reduce system involvement and recidivism. These programs assist members in the community with warrant recalls, post-conviction relief, pending criminal cases, housing, healthcare and other quality of life issues.

- The [Public Defender's Office of the Sixth Judicial Circuit of Florida, Pinellas County](#), operates the Homeless Outreach Program to reduce the incarceration of individuals who are homeless or at risk of becoming homeless.

Immigration specialists

Immigration attorneys embedded within public defender offices can work alongside defenders, contributing their highly specialized expertise to avoid or mitigate negative immigration consequences

9. See Gerber, Pang, Ross, Guggenheim, Pecora and Miller. Effects of an interdisciplinary approach to parental representation in child welfare. Children and Youth Services Review 102: 42-55. 2019 found [here](#).

from an underlying criminal case.¹⁰ In some offices, immigration attorneys advise defenders on case strategy and provide full immigration representation to clients in immigration proceedings.¹¹ Given the complexities of immigration law and the overwhelming caseloads of indigent criminal defenders, utilizing immigration specialists in public defense models helps to ensure that defenders are meeting their constitutionally mandated obligation to give accurate, case-specific immigration advice to every non-citizen client.¹²

Examples:

- The [Cook County Public Defender's Office](#) staffs immigration attorneys who assess potential adverse immigration consequences, recommend alternative resolutions, and represent current and former public defender clients in removal cases before the immigration court.
- The [Harris County Public Defender's Office](#) incorporates immigration specialists to help advise non-citizen clients about possible immigration consequences of pleas or convictions and provide written resources for attorneys regarding immigration consequences.

Mitigation specialists

Mitigation specialists are members of the defense team that focus on sentencing advocacy to reduce incarceration and support successful re-entry.¹³ They conduct investigation, interview clients and family members, obtain educational and mental health records and develop release plans.¹⁴ By presenting a full picture of the client at sentencing, mitigation specialists help judges make informed decisions, better serving clients and the community.¹⁵

Examples:

- The [Cook County Public Defender](#) uses mitigation specialists to interview clients and families, review records, and create detailed social histories to help attorneys advocate for alternatives to incarceration.
- The [Public Defender Service for D.C.](#) developed the Office of Rehabilitation and Development, staffed by forensic social workers and professional counselors, to provide psychosocial assessments, individualized treatment plans, and sentencing recommendations.
- The [Hennepin County Public Defender's Office](#) uses advocates to interview clients and families, review records, prepare sentencing reports, create individualized treatment plans, and connect clients to treatment and community resources. (More information is available [here](#).)

10. See Andres Dae Keun Kwon, *Defending Criminal(ized) "Aliens" After Padilla: Toward a More Holistic Public Immigration Defense in the Era of Crimmigration*, *UCLA Law Review*, Volume 63: 1034, 2016, found [here](#).

11. *Ibid*.

12. *Id.* at 1075.

13. See Vartkessian, Posel, Ginez and Hubbard, *When Justice Depends on It: The Need for Professional Standards for Mitigation Development in All Criminal Cases*, Volume 52: 449, 2022, found [here](#).

14. *Id.* at 468, 477-481.

15. *Id.* at 485.

**Interdisci-
plinary legal
services**

Interdisciplinary legal services

To reduce criminal legal system involvement, some offices implement programs to support clients beyond their criminal case, addressing other legal needs either stemming from or contributing to system involvement. This can include assistance in accessing benefits, eviction defense to promote housing stability, and other civil legal needs.

Examples:

- The Neighborhood Defender Service incorporates a [Civil Defense Practice](#) to represent clients with civil legal needs arising due to police or CPS contact and defend against evictions.
- The [Bronx Defenders](#) utilizes advocates to provide clients assistance with navigating legal systems and providing referrals for services.

Youth education advocacy and outreach

Education advocacy programs can provide support for court-involved youth in delinquency, school expulsion and suspension, and special education issues. These multi-disciplinary teams embedded in defense offices include advocates, social workers, and attorneys. By supporting youth clients to stay and succeed in school, these teams work to close the school-to-prison pipeline.

Such programs can also include youth outreach components, connecting defenders with students in their communities. Through mentorship, mock trial programs, and education, defenders can engage young people directly and prevent system involvement.

Examples:

- The [Bronx Defenders](#) created the Education Defense Project, a specialized team of attorneys and advocates who support students navigating the special education process and facing school discipline issues, including suspension hearings and expulsion hearings.
- The [Defenders Association of Philadelphia](#) created the Junior Defender Program providing outreach to students in neighborhoods disproportionately impacted by the criminal legal system.



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