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## CIVIL LEGAL AID RESEARCH

May 20, 2015

*Courtesy of Karen Lash, Access to Justice Initiative Deputy Director, U.S. Department of Justice*

Today, the U.S. Department of Justice National Institute of Justice (NIJ) and Access to Justice Initiative (ATJ), in collaboration with the National Science Foundation's Law and Social Sciences Program (NSF LSS), are hosting a Civil Legal Aid Research Workshop in Washington, D.C. This invitation-only workshop will bring researchers and practitioners together to further explore the existing and needed research around civil legal aid and its intersection with public safety and criminal justice.

These workshops are important because research matters. But since the early 1980s basic research into access to civil justice has fragmented into a number of highly specialized literatures across law and social science disciplines. A consequence of that fragmentation is that little high quality, publicly available data exists today to guide policy and programmatic decisions.

That's why ATJ staff participates in a range of practitioner and academic meetings like the ones happening today, to fill the research gap. As Stanford Law Professor Deborah Rhode wrote in the [Journal of Legal Education](#), "The [ATJ] office's interest in building bridges to legal academics prompted a meeting at Stanford University in 2011 under the sponsorship of the Stanford Center on the Legal Profession, the American Bar Foundation and the Harvard Program on the Legal Profession. One result of that meeting was the creation of a Consortium on Access to Justice. The mission of the consortium is to promote research and teaching on access to justice."

Building on the Stanford convening, ATJ then hosted a series of meetings that led to a National Science Foundation (NSF) workshop led by principal investigator and American Bar Foundation (ABF) Fellow Rebecca Sandefur. The December 7-8, 2012 ABF [workshop](#), entitled *Access to Civil Justice: Re-Envisioning and Reinvigorating Research*, was designed to identify key unanswered questions in access to justice central to both scholarship and practice, to open a conversation about partnerships on specific research projects and to launch a durable, national Access to Justice research program. The workshop, coupled with inspiration from NSF's March 13, 2013 [Dear Colleague Letter - Stimulating Research Related to the Use and Functioning of the Civil Justice System](#), contributed to the successful applications of four joint practitioner/researcher NSF applications on a range of topics such as studying outcomes from self-help strategies and representation in housing and small claims courts.

More recently, the March 27, 2015, remarks below by Karen Lash, Deputy Director, at the University of South Carolina School of Law [Data2J Research Roundtable on Access to Justice](#), outlines the imperative to develop a robust body of literature in light of the Obama Administration's evidence-based agenda that requires data to preserve, expand or propose new federal programs.

All of this combined explains why this administration—and the Justice Department in particular—seeks new funds in the 2016 budget request for nearly \$3 million to build the department's capacity for research and data collection related to civil legal aid.

During today's event, a multi-disciplinary workshop will include domestic and international experts, including civil legal aid experts, researchers, government officials - including representatives of the [Legal Aid Interagency Roundtable](#)-, and private funders. A discussion of the ongoing United Nations activity to establish the post-2015 sustainable development goals and likely inclusion of access to justice in that framework will be included. ATJ will generate a report summarizing

the presentations and discussions, including the participants' recommendations on a research agenda and federal priorities to advance this work. The outcome report will be similar to a 2011 report that ATJ issued following a workshop on indigent defense research available [here](#). That report helped inform federal research priorities and activities on indigent defense. We expect this civil legal aid counterpart to do the same.

For an overview of the current need for expanding available literature on civil legal aid and what works, see [keynote remarks](#) delivered last month by Karen Lash, ATJ Deputy Director, at the University of South Carolina School of Law, [DATA2J Research Roundtable on Access to Justice](#) , on March 26, 2015.

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