

# STOP Violence Against Women Formula Grant

Federally-funded technology innovations in state courts to increase access to justice among victims of domestic violence



**STOP (Services, Training, Officers, and Prosecutors) Violence Against Women Formula Grants are awarded by the U.S. Department of Justice Office on Violence Against Women (DOJ OVW) to states and territories to develop and strengthen the criminal justice system's response to violence against women and to support and enhance services for victims.** States must allocate funds according to a statutory formula that includes 5 percent to state and local courts, and 30 percent for crime victim services, which can include a [full range of legal services](#), including housing, family law, and public benefits.



**Several states have used STOP funds for technological innovations in state courts to increase access to civil justice among victims of domestic violence, dating violence, sexual assault, and stalking.** This includes tools like e-filing, online hubs of resources for petitioners and self-represented litigants, and informational videos on the court process for obtaining orders for protection.

## Most Victims of Violence Must Navigate a Maze to Obtain Legal Remedies

*"In addition to supporting domestic violence survivors, legal aid attorneys help their clients gain economic independence and rebuild their lives. Civil legal aid reduces repeat incidences of domestic violence, thus cutting public spending on medical care, special education, and counseling for affected children, as well as police resources."*

Legal Services Corporation, [Fact Sheet: How Legal Aid Helps Domestic Violence Survivors](#) (2017)<sup>3</sup>

Victims of domestic or sexual violence often face a [multitude of civil legal needs](#), including assistance filing for protection orders or divorce to escape an abusive partner, gaining child custody, resolving issues like identity theft and unstable housing, and obtaining employment.<sup>4</sup> But most victims find civil court systems and the processes for obtaining protection orders and victim services confusing and intimidating. Several state courts have increased access to justice and safety for survivors by adopting federally-funded technological innovations like e-filing, online information hubs, and informational videos.

## STOP Funds Support Victim Services and Court Innovation Projects

STOP grants are [authorized by](#) the Violence Against Women Act (VAWA) and subsequent legislation to support communities, including Native tribes, in strengthening effective responses to sexual assault, domestic violence, dating violence, and stalking.<sup>5</sup> Each state and territory [must allocate](#) 25 percent of the grant funds for law enforcement, 25 percent for prosecutors, 30 percent for victim services (of which at least 10 percent must be distributed to culturally specific community-based organizations), 5 percent to state and local courts, and 15 percent as discretionary within the parameters of VAWA.<sup>6</sup> In [Fiscal Year 2019](#), DOJ OVW gave out 56 STOP awards totaling over \$154 million.<sup>7</sup>

Among the twenty purpose areas specified in [34 U.S.C. § 10441](#) are "developing, enlarging, or strengthening victim services and legal assistance programs" and "developing and implementing more effective police, court, and prosecution policies, protocols, orders, and services specifically devoted to preventing, identifying, and responding to violent crimes against women, including the crimes of domestic violence, dating violence, sexual assault, and stalking, as well as the appropriate treatment of victims."<sup>8</sup> These and several other purpose areas allow the use of STOP funding for technology innovations to help victims in the courts. DOJ OVW further clarified allowable uses for STOP funds in its most recent [Frequently Asked Questions About Stop Formula Grants](#), published in 2017.<sup>9</sup>



## Examples of STOP-Funded Technology to Enhance Access to Justice in the Courts

Several grants awarded in 2017 and 2018 funded technological innovations in courts to increase access to civil justice among victims of domestic violence. Preparing and filing protection orders involve processes particularly well-suited for adopting new technologies. The need to enhance remote services to court users became essential during the COVID-19 pandemic, and technology innovations will continue to help courts better serve their communities even after the public health crisis has abated.

- ▶ **Alabama Administrative Office of Courts** provided online access to resources like information packets on the court's domestic violence processes in multiple languages for self-represented litigants.<sup>10</sup>
- ▶ **Indiana Supreme Court Office of Court Services** launched an e-filing system for civil protection orders that enabled petitioners to file online and remotely.<sup>11</sup>
- ▶ **Oregon Judicial Department (OJD)** worked with Violence Against Women Act staff counsel to revise all five of Oregon's protection order instructions, petitions, and orders and to make them available on the OJD website. The court also created online interactive forms which allow people to apply remotely and online for a protection order.<sup>12</sup>
- ▶ **Administrative Office of Pennsylvania Courts** collaborated with the Pennsylvania Coalition on Domestic Violence to create an informational video explaining in both English<sup>13</sup> and Spanish<sup>14</sup> the types of protection orders available and the process for obtaining one.
- ▶ **Office of the Executive Secretary of the Supreme Court of Virginia** supported production of "Protective Orders in Virginia – What You Need to Know" videos in English, Spanish, and English with Open Captioning, as well as creation of I-CAN! Virginia, a free online forms completion program available in both English and Spanish that enables practitioners to complete and print out the forms necessary to obtain a protective order.<sup>15</sup> I-CAN! Virginia is also available on computer Public Access Workstations, installed across the state in most General District Courts.
- ▶ **New York Office of Court Administration** expanded e-filing of civil protection orders throughout the state, lessening the burden on and increasing safety for victims of domestic violence.<sup>16</sup>

*"Courts are becoming increasingly creative in their use of web technologies to enhance access to courts and information for domestic violence victims and offenders. Web-based court information and technology tools, such as document-assembly programs, informational videos, e-filing, and downloadable forms have allowed for access around the clock. In Virginia, STOP court funding has been instrumental in our efforts to develop programs and services that improve access to justice through technology since 2005."*

Madelynn Herman, Statewide Domestic Violence Programs Coordinator, Office of the Executive Secretary, Supreme Court of Virginia

### Endnotes

1. U.S. Department of Justice Office on Violence Against Women, *Formula Grant Programs* (n.d.), <https://www.justice.gov/ovw/page/file/1117621/download>. See also <https://www.vawamei.org/grant-program/stop-formula-grant-program/>
2. U.S. Department of Justice Office on Violence Against Women, *Frequently Asked Questions (FAQs) About STOP Formula Grants* (2017), <https://www.justice.gov/ovw/page/file/1008816/download>
3. Legal Services Corporation, *Fact Sheet: How Legal Aid Helps Domestic Violence Survivors* (2017), <https://lsc-live.app.box.com/s/jx2x12363a156c01580f1j77plpmit6w>
4. See The Justice in Government Project, *Key Studies and Data about how Legal Aid Assists Domestic Violence Survivors*, <https://www.american.edu/spa/jpo/toolkit/upload/domestic-violence-7-30-19.pdf>
5. See <https://www.justice.gov/ovw/legislation>
6. *Supra* note 1.

7. See <https://www.justice.gov/ovw/awards/fy-2019-ovw-grant-awards-program#STOP%20Formula>
8. See <https://www.law.cornell.edu/uscode/text/34/10441>
9. *Supra* note 2.
10. See <https://eforms.alacourt.gov/>
11. See <https://www.in.gov/judiciary/4267.htm>
12. See <https://www.courts.oregon.gov/services/online/Pages/iforms.aspx>
13. See <https://www.palawhelp.org/resource/how-to-obtain-a-civil-protection-order-video?ref=WCMUE>
14. See <https://vimeo.com/290358270>
15. See <http://www.pulaskicounty.org/courts.html> and <https://vacourtformhelp.courts.state.va.us/>
16. See <https://iappscontent.courts.state.ny.us/NYSCEF/live/unrepresented/UnrepresentedHomePage.html>