

APPLICANT FEEDBACK SUMMARY: External Review 2016 AmeriCorps State and National Grant Competition

LEGAL APPLICANT: Administrative Office of the Courts
PROGRAM NAME: JusticeCorps

APPLICATION ID: 16AC181875

The purpose of this summary feedback is to enhance our programs by improving the quality and quantity of applications to the Corporation for National and Community Service (CNCS). These comments originate from the External Review, and are not meant to represent a comprehensive assessment. Rather, the analysis pertains to the evidence base portion of the application and the elements that had the greatest impact on Reviewer determinations for the Evidence Tier and Quality Rating. This feedback consists of summary comments from more than one Reviewer. For this reason, some of the comments may seem inconsistent or contradictory. Comments are not representative of all of the information used in the final funding decision.

External Reviewers' Summary Comments

Evidence Tier: PRE-PRELIMINARY

Evidence Tier Justification: The applicant seeks to engage 310 AmeriCorps members to serve people coming to court without an attorney who are trying to resolve crucial legal matters affecting their family, housing, personal safety, and financial stability. Members will serve in court-based self-help centers in the Bay Area, Los Angeles and San Diego educating litigants on their legal options and potential outcomes. The overall aim of the JusticeCorps' program is to enhance the ability of individuals facing family, housing, financial, and personal safety crises to navigate the legal system. This is vital to achieving economic self-sufficiency and community stability. JusticeCorps' theory of change takes a systems-level approach, providing inputs and achieving outcomes at the recipient (SRLs), provider (JusticeCorps members), and organizational (participating courts) levels. In this model, Members are trained to assist litigants, litigants move through the system more confidently and with better knowledge, and the courts are able to serve more efficiently and deliver appropriate service for an entire community at a disadvantage. AmeriCorps members will serve people coming to court without an attorney who are trying to resolve crucial legal matters affecting their family, housing, personal safety, and financial stability. JusticeCorps members will serve in court-based self-help centers in the Bay Area, Los Angeles and San Diego educating litigants on their legal options and potential outcomes. By providing neutral assistance—not legal advice—JusticeCorps members will empower litigants to make the best choice for their particular case. Each year, Members will provide 100,000 instances of assistance to self-represented litigants helping them accurately complete 110,000 legal forms. The program provides access to justice regardless of income level, language, or socioeconomic status and helps litigants resolve their cases so they can move to a place of stability in their lives. JusticeCorps members serve under the supervision of qualified court staff, providing assistance for litigants. Typically, Minimum Time (or "student") Members—enrolled undergraduate students recruited from JusticeCorps partner universities—serve 8 hours per week, either in 1 full-day or 2 half-day shifts. Full-time fellows serve 5 days a week, providing litigant assistance during self-help center business hours and acting as team leads for the cohort of student Members assigned to their site. The average dosage is 1 session of 15 minutes in length. However, Members provide direct service to litigants in interactions that may range anywhere from 10 minutes to 2 hours to an entire morning, based on litigants' needs and the complexity of their legal issues.

JusticeCorps members in 27 court-based self-help centers will provide: 1) triage - conducting the initial assessment of litigants' needs and directing them to another JusticeCorps member (who can provide personalized service), or center staff who can assist them, or making a referral; 2) case management - assessing litigants' case status, educating them about next steps—such as filing for a fee waiver, requesting a hearing or submitting a proposed judgment; referrals -

providing litigants with information to educate them on their options and making referrals to appropriate services inside or outside the courts; forms assistance - assistance identifying and completing legal forms and procedures, one-on-one or in workshops; court follow-up - observing in the courtroom and providing litigants with information about the meaning of court orders and next steps after courtroom sessions; and language assistance - providing assistance to litigants in their native language. In many cases, Members provide some or all of the types of assistance described above to the same litigant during 1 visit or provide assistance over the course of multiple visits. A litigant may need a brief referral to move on in his or her case. More often, a JusticeCorps member will sit and work with a litigant one-on-one for 2 hours or more, assisting with the completion of forms to ensure safety in a domestic violence situation, translating for a litigant who is trying to settle a dispute with his or her landlord, or working on custody paperwork for a parent with low literacy skills. In the short term, SRLs are better prepared to move forward with their family, civil, or small claims cases. This program intervention gives litigants the tools they need to navigate an unfamiliar and process-bound system. Long-term, this intervention will help litigants move to a place of stability—securing housing, finalizing custody or guardianship agreements, or settling domestic violence or financial issues that affect their employment, healthcare, or educational prospects. To achieve the Preliminary-Outcome Evidence Tier the applicant had to submit at least 1 outcome study of its own intervention that was either a pre-test and post-test without a comparison group or a post-test only with a comparison group. Further, the outcome study had to include data beyond that collected as part of routine performance measurement, the data were described in detail, and the results were promising for the proposed intervention. However, the applicant was assessed at Pre-Preliminary status the applicant because it: 1) conducted a process evaluation assessing implementation of 1 or more elements in its logic model, explained the data collection process and results, and explained the link between data collection and relevant components of its logic model; 2) collected systematic and accurate data to test or track community need, activities and services delivered, participation in the intervention by the target population, or participant outcomes including performance data. The applicant noted that its program has undergone several external evaluations conducted by independent evaluators that have provided preliminary evidence of program effectiveness and support for the program model through a series of implementation evaluations (i.e., process evaluations).

These 2 studies, focused on process and implementation, are discussed here. The applicant first cites an evaluation conducted in 2009 which focused on identifying the core elements of the program model and documenting the variations in implementation across 22 program sites in 3 regions. While all 22 sites participated in data collection, 6 sites were selected as study sites where additional data were gathered and which received observations by evaluation staff. Several methodologies were used to gather data during this study including quantitative surveys completed by JusticeCorps members and self-represented litigants, structured qualitative site observations, structured qualitative key informant interviews, structured qualitative focus group, and analysis of existing quantitative service data. The structured observations revealed there were a variety of approaches for utilizing the services of JusticeCorps members within the legal self-help center context including variations in the type and range of tasks handled by Members, the level of assistance provided by Members to self-represented litigants; the type of interaction between Site Supervisors and Members; and the different methods of program management. The structured key informant interviews conducted with program administrators and court staff stakeholders identified and examined the program elements and strategies that were critical to program success, including: recruitment and selection; training and supervision; retention; working well with university partners; partnering with nonprofit agencies; site expansion; and developing roles for full-time Members. Additionally, the interviews and site observations uncovered a number of program challenges that might impede program success. As a result of this evaluation recommendations for program improvement were made. These included: continue to strengthen and emphasize onsite training; enhance and support the critical role of Site Supervisors; use full-time JusticeCorps members in key roles; fine tune the role of university representatives; look for opportunities to expand JusticeCorps members' roles; and fully integrate JusticeCorps members into the work of the self-help centers.

In 2009, along with the implementation study, a snapshot study was conducted to gather feedback from and assess the outcomes for self-represented litigants served by the program. A confidential survey was distributed to all litigants

assisted by Members during a 2-week period at 6 study sites. In total, 377 surveys were returned. The litigants were "complimentary" of the services provided by the Members and 90% reported that the overall assistance they received was "excellent" and offered no suggestions about how services could be improved as they were totally satisfied with the assistance that they had received. A follow-up implementation evaluation conducted 3 years later by the same external, independent evaluators sought to determine the extent to which program improvement recommendations were implemented across program sites to further refine the JusticeCorps program model. This evaluation gathered quantitative survey data Site Supervisors and qualitative interview data from program administrators across all 3 regions to learn about improvements that were made to the programs in the 3 ensuing years from the last implementation study. The results indicated many of the best practices identified in the 2009 study had been adopted and/or adapted program-wide by 2012 and there was standardization across the regions in the orientation training program and shared practices for supervision and reflection. Program administrators had effectively used the previous evaluation recommendations, had taken steps to share best practices and training materials so that the JusticeCorps program would continually refine and improve, and so that Members could be expected to have a common, positive experience serving at any program site. In addition to the 2 implementation evaluations, the evaluator gathered preliminary evidence of program outcomes. Additionally, there were some pre-post survey data collected from Members. Sample sizes included 163 completed surveys in 2009 and 169 surveys in 2012. The results across these 2 years were very consistent.

A pre to post analysis of civic knowledge and civic engagement skills resulted in significant improvements on all issues queried in both study years (the differences were statistically significant at the $p < 0.0001$ level). For both years, the largest gains were a better understanding of the legal rights and responsibilities of self-represented litigants, and better knowledge of the government services and agencies that impact this population. According to the applicant's logic model, however, these outcomes do not match those listed in their narrative. The short-term outcomes listed in the narrative are all related to the litigants: 42,000 self-represented litigants who are served for 15 minutes or more have a better understanding of the legal process; feel more confident as a self-represented litigant; feel better prepared to proceed with and resolve their case; and are clearer about the next step in their case. No outcomes related to Members are listed in the logic model. It is assumed then these questions asked of AmeriCorps members in the 2 studies related more to understanding process and implementation. Taken together the applicant did provide some data around the activities area of their logic model and did describe the data collection process as a systematic collection of data, and the 2 implementation evaluations of the California JusticeCorps program provide sufficient preliminary evidence to support the conclusions that the JusticeCorps program model is likely to result in the outcomes identified in the Theory of Change. Therefore, the applicant was assessed at the Pre-Preliminary Evidence Tier.

Quality Rating Justification: The Quality Ratings are justified for the following reasons. First, the evaluations described in the narrative to assess process and implementation were well-designed because they used mixed methods (e.g., structured quantitative surveys, structured interviews, structured site observations, structured focus groups, and secondary data analysis of existing service data) that captured and triangulated data from a variety of sources in order to minimize potential invalidities towards generalizing findings. Further, the studies cited were appropriate as evidence because they had a dual purpose of assessing process and outcomes (2009) and nearly as important, in terms of evaluation use, determining whether recommendations made in 2009 were adopted by 2012. Additionally, the studies were relatively recent (e.g., 2012) and conducted by an external evaluator. However, the applicant did not provide any detail about how data collection tools (e.g., structured observation, structure interview, structured focus group protocols) were developed, upon what constructs items were based, and what specific information the evaluators wanted to uncover from the implementation of these tools. Further, there was no information provided about how the tools were implemented or how existing quantitative service data were analyzed and to what end. In addition, the applicant provides findings from the observations and interviews yet fails to offer any information on how qualitative data were analyzed. The applicant did not discuss what information was gathered from focus groups and how that data were used in determining findings. The applicant noted that in 2009 the evaluator conducted a snap-shot survey distributed to litigants, but again failed to provide any information about how the survey was

developed, who was responsible for its implementation, upon what constructs items were based, how data were collected and analyzed, and survey findings. Last, regarding the applicant's logic model, there was no connection between the elements contained therein and evidence provided by the evaluations cited in the narrative. Evaluation outcomes discussed in the narrative are focused on program implementation and improvement, litigant satisfaction, and preliminary outcomes for JusticeCorps members. The logic model, however, indicated outcomes for litigants who are served for 15 minutes or more having a better understanding of the legal process feeling more confident as a self-represented litigant, feeling better prepared to proceed with and resolve their case, and are clearer about the next step in their case. Further, documents filed by litigants as assisted by Members will be accurately completed; more court cases will be concluded with judgments and orders on file in a timely manner; litigant life circumstances will improve as a result of completing their case (e.g., achieve housing stability, family stability, and/or personal safety); and court processes will be more efficient and effective.