

# CIVIL LEGAL AID SUPPORTS FEDERAL EFFORTS TO ASSIST LAW ENFORCEMENT AND PROMOTE PUBLIC SAFETY

## THE NEED

Trust between law enforcement and the communities they serve is essential for the safety and stability of our nation, the integrity of our criminal justice system, and the effective delivery of policing services. Police who understand communities can deploy resources at critical times, avoid dynamics that can lead to violence, and find and collaborate with community partners who can help improve public safety in a sustainable way.

Creating and building police-community trust can be a challenging endeavor. In many low-income, crime-impacted neighborhoods, fear and suspicion of police can create barriers to long-lasting, trusting relationships. Trust on both sides of the police/citizen divide will naturally deepen as collaborative efforts proceed and as partners continue to prove themselves through performance.

## EXAMPLES OF THE FEDERAL RESPONSE

The federal government has long recognized the need to build strong relationships between law enforcement and the communities they serve. In 1994, Congress established the Office of Community Oriented Policing Services (COPS) within the Department of Justice (DOJ), with the aim of advancing the community policing model in local departments. Under this model, law enforcement agencies collaborate with community residents to identify problems and implement solutions that protect communities, while proactively addressing the conditions that create public safety risks. COPS, which provides grants and technical assistance, has funded nearly 10,000 community policing officers since 2009.

In 2011, the Department of Education (ED) and DOJ announced the Supportive School Discipline Initiative to encourage the use of school discipline practices that foster safe, supportive, and productive learning environments while keeping students in school. As part of this Initiative, ED and DOJ issued a School Discipline Guidance Package which, among other things, highlighted the role of school-based law enforcement officers and underscored the importance of focusing such roles on improving school safety and reducing inappropriate referrals to law enforcement.

In December 2014, President Obama created the Task Force on 21<sup>st</sup> Century Policing to identify best practices and offer recommendations on how policing practices can promote effective crime reduction while building public trust. In March 2015, DOJ announced six pilot cities for the National Initiative for Building Community Trust and Justice, a program designed to enhance procedural justice and support reconciliation between communities and law enforcement. COPS will also provide up to \$163 million in grants to assist state, local and tribal law enforcement implement the report's recommendations. In December 2015, DOJ issued guidance on identifying and preventing gender bias in law enforcement responses to sexual assault and domestic violence, thereby strengthening police-community relations. Since taking office in spring 2015, Attorney General Lynch has also embarked on a multi-city National Community Policing Tour, highlighting collaborative programs and innovative policing designed to advance public safety and strengthen police-community relations.

**President's Task Force on 21<sup>st</sup> Century Policing recommends that law enforcement agencies collaborate with legal aid and other community groups to build trust and develop effective solutions to make communities safe.**



~Report of the President's Task Force on 21st Century Policing (2015)



“” Our neighborhoods are strongest when police collaborate with trusted local partners, **SUCH AS LEGAL AID**, to meet residents’ public safety needs.

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## Legal Aid Helps

- **Protect victims of crime** by helping them to obtain protective orders, housing, and child support.
- **Secure alternatives to incarceration** by helping divert individuals with mental health and substance abuse issues into community-based treatment programs.
- **Stop the school-to-prison pipeline**, by helping students and parents obtain representation in school disciplinary hearings and special education for children with disabilities.
- **Assist homeless individuals** access the services they need.
- **Identify individuals at risk of committing or becoming victims of crime**, and intervene to mediate conflicts.
- **Provide legal support to community-based organizations**, where police can refer at-risk individuals.
- **Identify recurring problems** that lead to involvement in the criminal justice system.
- **Help secure visas for victims of crime like domestic violence and human trafficking**, who are in need of immigration relief apart from their abusers.
- **Correct harm caused by identity theft or credit reporting errors** by providing forms and letters to fix credit discrepancies and by aiding victims in reporting theft to the proper federal and local authorities.
- **Report complaints** about financial and other consumer harms to appropriate government entities.

### Police partnership with legal aid help decrease incidence of domestic violence

The High Point Police Department partnered with Legal Aid of North Carolina, Family Service of the Piedmont, and other community groups to open the High Point Center for Children and Families and Victims’ Justice as part of the COPS-funded Offender Focused Domestic Violence Initiative (OFVDI). The initiative focuses on early intervention to break the cycle of domestic violence, and helps victims with their civil legal needs, such as obtaining protective orders. Within the first two years of the OFVDI, recidivism rates – which typically range from 20-34% -- decreased to 9% across more than 1,000 offenders.

### Lawyers help police keep kids in school

Connecticut Legal Services led the formation of a stakeholder collaborative with the Waterbury police department, school district, Department of Children and Families, Waterbury Youth Service Bureau, juvenile probation and juvenile public defenders, to institute a multi-year initiative to advocate for better results for low-income children facing school disciplinary actions. The collaborative, among other things, streamlined the school disciplinary referral process, allowing for diversion options that avoid court intervention where unnecessary. Through these efforts, and the work of civil legal aid attorneys serving as education advocates, school arrests in Waterbury dropped by 34% from June 2013 to November 2015.

