

Dedicated grant management staff help courts obtain funding, ensure compliance, and expand court services

Courts simply don't have enough resources to truly meet their communities' needs. The typical legislative appropriation doesn't adequately fund the judicial branch, much less enable innovation. Other funding sources – like federal, state, and local grants – can help fill in the gaps. Accessing those dollars, however, takes time, staff, and resources. But as three different states in this case study show, it's well worth it.

While court staff can point to familiar programs and tools, such as user-friendly technology tools, court navigators, well-staffed self-help centers, and diversion programs to resolve disputes before they end up in court, these user-centered programs need sustained funding to continue and function well.

That's why more courts are creating dedicated staff positions for grants directors, managers, and/or analysts. There are many grant opportunities potentially available to advance the judiciary's mission – if courts know where to look and what to do once they secure funds. Dedicated grants management staff do exactly that – they work with court leadership, human resources, budget and finance, and other staff to identify funding, prepare grant applications, create budgets, nail the pre- and post-award processes, handle audits, and manage the overall big picture.

The COVID-19 pandemic dramatically increased the judicial branch's foray into the world of grants, especially the myriad federal funding streams administered by state and local governments. Those and many other grant opportunities await those courts able to pursue them. To get those dollars, however, it's crucial that the judicial branch have staff dedicated to every part of every grant's lifecycle.

This case study spotlights three courts and the staff who have done just that, each at different stages of development:

- ▶ In New Hampshire, the success of existing staff in securing \$1.5 million in pandemic-related grants led the Administrative Office of the Courts to plan for a dedicated grants position.
- ▶ Utah's Administrative Office of the Courts hired their first full-time grants coordinator position during the pandemic to develop and manage a comprehensive grants management system.
- ▶ The Massachusetts Trial Court's Grants Department launched in 2013 with one dedicated staff person and has since grown to five full-time staff and has secured more than \$30 million in new funds.

Grant management starts long before a grant is awarded. It begins with strategic planning – what funds the court will pursue, who will pursue them, and who will ensure compliance once the grant is awarded. Grant management means having dedicated staff working across silos to develop this strategy, implement grant awards, evaluate successful projects, and streamline future proposals.



New Hampshire: Plans underway to build on pandemic success securing grant funds

Jackie Waters, Access and Community Engagement Coordinator, New Hampshire Judicial Branch, Administrative Office of the Courts

Soon after New Hampshire's courthouse doors closed in March 2020, state Supreme Court (NHSC) representatives initiated conversations with the Director of the Governor's Office for Emergency Relief and Recovery about the judicial branch's pandemic-related budgetary needs. Without dedicated grants staff, they

reallocated existing staff to quickly learn grant-writing basics to pursue CARES Act funding for technology innovations that could ensure day-to-day operations. One staff member who learned the ropes was Jackie Waters, then the NHSC e-Court Program Director. To implement a successful virtual program and keep its "not so virtual" courthouse safe and running, the Supreme Court requested and received \$1.5 million in CARES Act Coronavirus Relief Funds. They used this money to meld on-site and remote services – like Webex oral arguments and equipment so staff could work from home and provide services to self-represented litigants – meeting court users where they were with responsive, accessible, and safe services.²

Jackie didn't do this alone. She participated in the State Justice Institute's (SJI) technical assistance initiative³ designed to support new grant writers and used helpful resources from the National Center for State Courts (NCSC).⁴ And internally, she worked closely with court leadership, the budget department, and program staff to identify needs and translate them into a formal proposal. She also found invaluable support from the New Hampshire Department of Justice's (NH DOJ) grants team, which had more extensive experience applying for and overseeing federal and other external funding streams.

From NH DOJ she learned that some grants allow the budget to include grant management staff. When NHSC and NH DOJ worked together on a U.S. Department of Justice Bureau of Justice Assistance grant for \$1.5 million to support innovations and expansion of their Drug Courts, they included funds for a grants manager. That successful application has catalyzed not only a first-ever grants manager position in the Administrative Office of the Courts, but also sets the foundation for an expanded grants management unit.⁵

As they transition from an ad hoc pandemic-inspired grants approach to dedicated staff with grants management skills, all stakeholders are enthusiastic about the potential for new funding sources to support additional innovations. Jackie is assisting in the hiring process and will serve as an on-going "go-to" resource to the new team.

Jackie's top tip: "My motto is 'let no wheel be reinvented.' There are lots of resources and experienced staff – sometimes in other parts of the government – who are eager to help. For us, the NH DOJ was our version of a grants Obi-Wan Kenobi. Learning the details of federal grants and writing a proposal was probably some of the most challenging work I've taken on. But it's all worth it, knowing that our court users have access to the help they need."



Utah: New position created during the pandemic leads to a reinvigorated grants management focus at the Utah Courts

Jordan Murray, Grants Coordinator, Utah Judicial Branch, Administrative Office of the Courts

On the heels of a range of innovations including its much acclaimed legal regulatory sandbox,⁶ the Utah Supreme Court recognized the need for new funding sources to implement new court services. The pandemic sped this planning forward, and a job posting for the court's first Grants Coordinator went live in October 2020.⁷ Building on his experience working for the State of Oregon and two Oregon county government offices, Jordan Murray accepted the position soon after and has since been working to build a comprehensive grants management system and expanded portfolio for the Utah Courts.

As a member of the finance team, he has already: 1) helped secure a State Justice Institute grant for the Supreme Court's Office of Legal Services Innovation; 2) developed and refined the Court's Code of Judicial Administration Rule 3-411 Grant Management⁸ establishing the policy and procedures for grant fund applications; and 3) updated the Court's Grants Manual⁹ that guides all grants – federal and non-federal – where the courts are the recipient or pass-through recipient of public or private grant funds.

As the Grants Coordinator, Jordan is responsible for the ongoing development and oversight of grants management practices. This includes everything from conducting initial research to identify funding

opportunities, building relationships with present and future funders, grant writing and application support, and all post-award monitoring/reporting activities. Jordan also reports regularly to the Utah Judicial Council (governing body of the Judicial Branch), and the Council's Budget & Fiscal Management Committee.

Jordan's advice to others starting a new grants management program: "Be certain to establish roles and expectations for all staff involved in the grants process and clarify the expectations of your governing bodies. Who will provide the technical expertise necessary for applications, and who will monitor the funds? Whose input is critical for providing accurate funder updates, and what is the continuity plan if key personnel resign? One grants specialist can't perform all of these duties or have an answer to every situation. A healthy grants management 'ecosystem' is never a one-person show. Finally, never underestimate the positive influence of an internal champion. These influential individuals are contagious in their passion and knowledge about the project. They will open doors, grease wheels, and shake trees!"

Massachusetts: Five-person grants management team helps secure more than \$30 million in new funds

Jessica Fix, Senior Grant Manager, Massachusetts Executive Office of the Trial Court

In 2013, a representative from the U.S. Department of Justice Office for Access to Justice gave a presentation to Massachusetts court staff about potential federal funding sources for courts. Soon after, then Court Administrator Harry Spence and Chief Justice of the Trial Court Paula M. Carey appointed a grants committee to consider next steps. One of the Committee's first recommendations was to hire Jessica Fix- who had previously worked 15 years for non-profits and other state government agencies in grant management – as the court's first Grant Manager.

In a 2014 Transmittal memo, Chief Justice Carey and Administrator Spence signaled to the entire Trial Court the challenge and the opportunity in front of them:¹⁰ "We understand that additional efforts are required at all stages of grant funded projects. We thank you for your willingness to be proactive in pursuing supplemental funding sources to support creativity and innovation."

Since Jessica joined in 2013, the court's external funding has increased from under \$1 million to more than \$30 million enabling it to launch new and expand existing projects. For example, the number of specialty courts, such as drug treatment courts, increased from 22 to 53. The courts were able to leverage their mostly federal funds to secure significant state funding for specialty courts.

Jessica now leads a team of three Grant Coordinators and one Fiscal Grant Administrator.¹¹ She and her team are responsible for administrative, programmatic, and fiscal activities related to pre- and post-award coordination and expansion of grant funding from external sources that support Trial Court initiatives. In addition to the programmatic staff, Jessica has built grant-funded staffing support into applications in order to perform the administrative and fiscal aspects of grants management. The Massachusetts Trial Court's grant funding comes from 10 different federal, state, and local funding sources, which all have specific, nuanced requirements. Ongoing training by the Grant Department and funders ensures that project teams adhere to grant requirements and keep abreast of emerging trends through professional development.

Jessica's favorite lesson learned: "Don't give up and always follow up with a funder. Get to know them. If your application is declined, request a debrief to find out what you can do better. Once, a debrief even turned into an award when another grantee could not successfully administer their grant project."

Eight Tips from the Experts:

1. **Grants management professionals matter.** Having at least one full-time equivalent staff dedicated to tracking every part of a grant's lifecycle, from pre-award research through post-award grant closeout, is essential. Successful grants units also have staff dedicated to cultivating relationships with public and private funders and participating in court-wide strategy/long-term planning sessions.
2. **When just starting, recruit existing staff to test the concept – and don't go it alone.** Find an existing staff person willing to go the extra mile to test the waters. Make it possible for them to take on the new grants challenge by relieving them of some responsibilities. Consider recruiting more experienced partners from the executive branch fluent in grants management to be mentors. Also, don't forget to use the valuable resources at SJI and NCSC.¹²
3. **Tap someone from the court's financial team.** Fiscal grant management responsibilities are many and require a symbiotic relationship with the grants professional. Every grant needs a budget coordinated with program staff by someone who knows fund-based accounting and Single Audit principles.
4. **Attention to detail is essential.** This work involves project management reports and the ability to monitor and evaluate information to determine compliance with contracts, grant solicitations, ever-changing rules and regulations, and strict adherence to deadlines. Clear governance and robust project management will increase the chances of your project running smoothly, meeting the grant goals, and avoiding complications or penalties.
5. **Listen to the Community.** The best proposals are developed with community input.¹³ Local stakeholder involvement will shape the request and increase the likelihood of successful implementation. Examples include seeking input on impactful pilot projects and forming an advisory committee to help guide the proposed project.
6. **Buy-in is essential.** Court leaders need to signal that the work isn't just for the grants manager – no one works in a silo, a grant touches all parts of the court. Also, some funders require a commitment of cash or in-kind funds to match the grant award. This requires support from court leaders and the staff who must document their in-kind time and effort. This evidence of commitment encourages investment from stakeholders and funders.
7. **Quality vs. quantity.** While funding does not always keep pace with staffing support, applications should consider building in staffing support into proposed budgets, similar to what NHSC has done with their most recent grant. Balancing the number of grants that impact quality versus quantity is critical to delivering and ensuring the success of the grant projects.
8. **Grant amount vs. administration.** Often the award amount does not correlate with the effort needed for administration. Each grant is unique, and the requirements can vary greatly. Relatedly, the influence of each grant award does not always correlate to its size. Small grants can produce a lasting impact, such as when the Massachusetts Trial Court received a \$10,000 award that launched the development of mandatory Transgender Training for more than 6,000 court staff.

Endnotes

1. See e.g., National Center for State Courts (June 2, 2022), *Tiny Case Studies: Pandemic Recovery Funds Support Court-Based Eviction Prevention Programs in Cook County, Illinois*. Available at: https://www.ncsc.org/_data/assets/pdf_file/0029/77465/Eviction-prevention-in-IL_6.2.22.pdf; National Center for State Courts (March 8, 2022), *Tiny Case Studies: Pandemic Recovery Funds Support Eviction Prevention in Cobb County, Georgia*. Available at: https://www.ncsc.org/_data/assets/pdf_file/0031/77467/Cobb-County-GA-Eviction-Prevention-4.18.22.pdf. See also, State Justice Institute (n.d.), *Funding Toolkit* (pandemic pass-through funds included in Formula Grants section). Available at <https://fundingtoolkit.sji.gov/formula-grants/>
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4. National Center for State Courts (n.d.), *Access to Justice Funding*. Available at: <https://www.ncsc.org/consulting-and-research/areas-of-expertise/access-to-justice/funding>. See also, National Center for State Courts (n.d.), *Ensuring Access to Justice*. Available at: <https://www.ncsc.org/consulting-and-research/areas-of-expertise/access-to-justice>
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8. Utah Code of Judicial Administration (Accessed August 25, 2022), *UCJA Rule 3-411 Grant Management*. Available at <https://utcourts.gov/rules/view.php?type=ucja&rule=3-411>
9. State of Utah Supreme Court (November 9, 2020), *Grants Manual (Federal and Non-Federal)*. Available at: <https://nationalcenterforstatecourts.app.box.com/s/8n1dg6orbwxcaxnct8vh8nppt3qrjijt9>
10. Executive Office of the Trial Court (February 6, 2014), *Executive Office Transmittal 14-1*. Available at: <https://nationalcenterforstatecourts.app.box.com/s/xt9mhba1zbqfzrohmqd3ec5po7swm>
11. Massachusetts Trial Court (March 2017), *Job Description and Qualifications for Senior Grant Manager*. Available at: <https://nationalcenterforstatecourts.app.box.com/s/tjjj4o63dtw34626sewkmxex05fi39>; Massachusetts Trial Court (January 17, 2020), *Grant Coordinator Job Description*. Available at: <https://nationalcenterforstatecourts.app.box.com/s/h3kp8fdr622mau2tak84ocx130ubwbf>
12. See supra 3, 4.
13. See e.g., National Center for State Courts (June 2, 2022), *Tiny Case Studies: Pandemic Recovery Funds Support Court-Based Eviction Prevention Programs in Cook County, Illinois*. Available at https://www.ncsc.org/_data/assets/pdf_file/0029/77465/Eviction-prevention-in-IL_6.2.22.pdf; National Center for State Courts (March 8, 2022), *Tiny Case Studies: Pandemic Recovery Funds Support Eviction Prevention in Cobb County, Georgia*. Available at https://www.ncsc.org/_data/assets/pdf_file/0031/77467/Cobb-County-GA-Eviction-Prevention-4.18.22.pdf