



Washington, D.C. 20530

**Access to Justice for Victims of Domestic Violence Project**

On October 27, 2010, the White House held [An Event to End Violence Against Women](#), where the President and Vice President announced a [series of projects targeted to combat domestic violence](#). Among these projects was the *Access to Justice for Victims of Domestic Violence Project*, a collaborative effort between the White House, the Office of the Vice President (OVP), and the U.S. Department of Justice’s Access to Justice Initiative (ATJ) to create a pool of lawyers with expertise in providing comprehensive legal representation to domestic violence victims.

Each year, approximately 1.3 million women are victims of physical assault by an intimate partner.<sup>1</sup> Studies suggest that access to legal services can be a critical tool in helping victims escape from abusive relationships and that access to counsel has helped to decrease the number of victims by as much as 21 percent.<sup>2</sup> In order to escape successfully and permanently from these relationships, domestic violence survivors must navigate multiple and diverse legal systems, ranging from securing a protective order against their abuser to complicated family law issues, including child custody disputes and accessing safe housing. The *Access to Justice for Victims of Domestic Violence Project* will train individuals, starting in their third year of law school, using a holistic model of representation for domestic violence victims to help these vulnerable clients address all of their legal needs and to help prevent further victimization.

To further this goal, the Office of the Vice President and the Access to Justice Initiative have helped to create partnerships between law school domestic violence clinics, legal services providers that provide services to domestic violence victims, and law firms. Students who pass through this “pipeline” – first through law school, then to a legal services provider, and then to a law firm – will begin their careers with experience that will help them to provide effective representation for these victims and their families.

While these pipelines could take a variety of forms, the first two established projects are taking the following approach:

1. The recruiting of students for this project begins with the law firms and occurs after the students are offered an associate position with the firm through the firm’s normal hiring process; i.e., usually after the completion of the firm’s summer

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<sup>1</sup> Patricia Tjaden & Nancy Thoennes, National Institute of Justice and the Centers of Disease Control and Prevention, “Extent, Nature and Consequences of Intimate Partner Violence: Findings from the National Violence Against Women Survey,” (2000).

<sup>2</sup> Amy Farmer & Jill Tiefenthaler, “Explaining the Recent Decline in Domestic Violence,” 21 Contemp. Econ. Pol’y. 158 (April 2003).

associate program and prior to the start of the student's third year of law school. The law firm identifies students who are eligible for the project and, working with the law school clinic and legal services provider, selects participants through a competitive process.

2. Selected students spend one to two semesters in their law school's domestic violence clinic, receiving training and supervision through the clinical program.
3. Upon graduation, the participants spend one to two years working at the legal services provider, acquiring additional training in comprehensive legal services and helping to ease the workload of the legal services provider. The participants are funded by the law firm during the time they are with the legal services provider, and the hours worked at the services provider are creditable to the firm as pro bono—as is the case when firms “loan” associates to public service providers. In all other respects, however, the participants are deemed employees of the legal services provider and covered through its malpractice insurance. As such, the participants' clients do not need to be reviewed for conflicts with the law firm's clients.
4. After completing their time with the legal services provider, the participants begin their career with the law firm with experience in the court room, an extensive motions practice, and real-life decision-making and problem-solving skills. Upon joining the law firm, the associates continue their relationship with the legal services provider on a pro bono basis and can serve as a resource to other attorneys in the firm interested in pursuing this work pro bono.

At the October, 2010 White House event, the Vice President announced the creation of two of these “pipeline” projects in New Orleans and Baltimore:

- In New Orleans, the pipeline partners are the Tulane Law School's Domestic Violence Clinic, the Southeast Louisiana Legal Services, and the law firm of Adams & Reese, LLP.
- In Baltimore, the pipeline partners are the Baltimore Law School's Family Law Clinic, the House of Ruth of Maryland, and the law firm of Venable LLP.

Chief Counsel to the ABA's Commission on Domestic Violence was instrumental in helping to form these partnerships and has committed to continuing to assist with these efforts going forward.

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