

Legal Services Corporation	Technology Initiative Grants
Bay Area Legal Services, Inc. (610050)	TIG # 20001

Project Narrative

1. Need for the project

Drafting documents is time-consuming and tedious work, yet each one plays a vital role in solving a client's legal issue.

As is true for many legal aid organizations, our legal staff – advocates, paralegals, and administrative assistants – have long been tediously filling documents, transferring information from various sources client by client to complete required paperwork. As a result of LSC's TIG projects and other resources, BALS has been aware of new technologies to address efficiencies in document production and business process management issues specific to legal assistance. These are issues that quietly affect both staff and clients daily at legal aid organizations, and significant progress has been made through TIG projects across the country – addressing a firm's intake process, for example, or pro se operations.

BALS has identified a need to look inward to make a major shift in our ways of doing business to improve the delivery of services as our client applications and staff have grown significantly in the past three years. Currently, BALS serves low-income residents of five fast-growing counties in the Tampa Bay area, annually handling more than 58,000 inquiries by phone or online. In each of the past two years, our staff assisted more than 16,000 applicants (2018, 2019). Last year, the firm helped approximately 17,600 individual families and community groups – including more than 4,500 senior clients, 3,300 clients with housing problems, 1,200 veterans, and 400 domestic violence survivors. Each of these individuals and each case required not only attention and expertise but also involved one or more individualized documents.

In 2018, the firm hired a full-time business process improvement (BPI) and project manager to address the firm-wide need for accelerated modernization and automation of both internal and outward-facing “paperwork” and processes. This TIG grant is part of BALS' ongoing BPI initiative, which has the attention, endorsement, and commitment of the firm's executive and management leadership, including our fourteen “teams” and their managing attorneys or project managers (Team Leaders). Now more than ever, COVID-19's relentless grip on Florida has abruptly made us change how we work together and has revealed BPI to be crucial: we need smart, agile systems based on design that has staff buy-in for a culture of continuous improvement that reflects an established culture of caring, a focus on maximum value-added service to clients. This TIG proposal will fund a two-tiered in-house project designed to improve BALS' operational efficiencies and effectiveness in the communities we serve – ultimately to better serve our rapidly expanding client populations and their rapidly deepening issues.

The proposed Project Lead for this TIG, our BPI/Project Manager David Gray, will work directly with our teams' advocates and staff to identify and automate their most commonly used documents, to enable more efficient and effective uses of advocates' time. For example, a form that takes 30 minutes to draft in its current state may take less than five after implementing a document assembly system and BPI – this is the performance gap we seek to solve. Our advocates will spend less time (redundantly) drafting documents for thousands of clients, freed to concentrate on providing high-quality services to each. Using the process improvement method DMAIC (Define, Measure, Analyze, Improve, Control), the Project Lead will work with BALS advocates and staff to improve the client document creation process. Using a collaborative and firm-wide approach, BPI aims to identify and resolve the root cause of current process issues, create high-impact and long-lasting change, and integrate a firm-wide commitment to a continuous process improvement culture.

By freeing up advocate time and firm resources, we can add value where the organization needs it most – improving client service. We seek an improved document assembly system with a measurable impact on

Legal Services Corporation	Technology Initiative Grants
Bay Area Legal Services, Inc. (610050)	TIG # 20001

the firm: eliminating time wasted in the current document creation process, improving service quality, increasing capacity to serve more clients. We are confident that administrative tasks such as transferring information and filling out documents are a drag on our ability to serve clients. Less time spent on tasks that can be automated and easily integrated into our systems will translate into more time spent on client legal matters. This project will borrow from and build on precursor TIG models, and we intend to become an added resource for other legal aid organizations seeking internal efficiencies that improve client outcomes. COVID-19 has sharply focused project urgency.

In our TIG plans, BALS advocates and staff are the ones identifying and implementing the improvements. BALS advocates and staff have expressed their frustration with a number of the operational bottlenecks in documentation and related processes that this project seeks to address. Crucially, to the degree that their participation contributes to the changes made, they will feel invested and more likely to ensure the project succeeds – a core value at BALS and a critical component in the success of most corporate culture changes. The project’s BPI assessment process and hands-on team involvement will enable our staff to have a complete understanding of how a task or function is performed at all levels of the firm, allowing advocates and staff to understand their work better individually and as a team, to simplify and improve their own processes, identify new processes to be improved, implement technology to enhance their work, increase adoption of new practices and technology, and ultimately reduce costs. All of this will be undertaken within the context of serving more clients, better.

This project offers two rare features. First, most document assembly projects to date focus on external use by pro se litigants. BALS is focusing its efforts internally. In order to provide the best possible document assembly system for external constituencies and purposes, we must first understand, evaluate, and optimize an internal process that benefits our clients. Second, while many legal aid organizations may devote part of a staffer's time to process improvement or a TIG project, David Gray is a full-time in-house BPI expert who reports to the COO with the primary focus of BPI and project management. He will lead the TIG project and BPI initiatives at the firm, educate and train staff, and work continuously to create a collaborative firm-wide culture of continuous improvements.

BALS enjoys the advantage of having a full-time BPI/Project Manager, whom leadership will free to spend 75% of his time for two years as Project Lead on this technology innovation and improvements project. Although this is not explicitly a replication project, our designated Project Lead has already proactively reached out to other projects to inform our thought process and project design, and we hope that in turn what we learn will be of use to many other legal aid organizations, replicable in relevant details and scale. As the project progresses, our Project Lead will call on the expertise of six process, project, and technology experts he has enlisted as project mentors and collaborators to advise the project in our efforts to design a high-efficiency document assembly system, launch it, and modify it as we implement changes firm-wide. Ultimately, BALS intends that David Gray will be a resource for other legal aid organizations, helping them learn from the challenges we encounter and adapting our project’s virtues in service to their clients.

BALS will implement system-wide internal improvements partly in response to staff-generated issues and their vision that their time and energy can be more efficiently employed to serve their clients better – our core mission. An appreciation of the importance of this mission and project is indicated by letters of support from the region’s United Way Suncoast (five counties) and Hillsborough County’s Senior Connection Center (administrates funding for our Senior Advocacy Unit); these and other community-based organizations count on BALS as the region’s only comprehensive legal aid organization serving the low-income residents we all value. The project’s technical changes and corresponding shift toward continuous improvement will further LSC’s goals of putting technologies to use to increase access to justice for our low-income clients.

Legal Services Corporation	Technology Initiative Grants
Bay Area Legal Services, Inc. (610050)	TIG # 20001

2. A full description of the project, including the specific technologies the project will develop or implement

Especially under Florida’s continuing COVID-19 crisis, which has not stopped but often has complicated legal issues for many low-income residents, BALS seeks to update, integrate, and streamline internal document assembly to free our legal teams to serve more clients more efficiently and more effectively. We will adapt elements of other TIG projects that fit our systems and objectives, with direct input from model legal aid staff and other content experts, and we intend to produce results that contribute to LSC’s body of replicable best practices in technological innovations.

This 2-year project proposes an internal system-wide implementation of best practices involving two elements crucial to technological and operational efficiencies: (1) document assembly and (2) business process improvement (BPI). David Gray, BALS full-time BPI/Project Manager, will devote 75% of his time as the Project Lead to work throughout the 24-month TIG project period in partnership with firm advocates and staff, legal community collaborators, and technical mentors to achieve project objectives. Our project is unusual because the Project Lead is an experienced BPI professional, a full-time BALS employee focused year-round on BPI. Additionally, our project's scope is to institutionalize system-wide internal improvements that potentially benefit thousands of clients across many types of legal needs rather than focus on one particular BPI target, such as improvements to an outward-facing pro se operation. During the project period, David Gray will attend several trainings himself and will be working with six colleagues who have agreed to serve as mentors, informal consultants, and collaborators to inform the project. He will also welcome and supervise an Access to Justice Tech Fellow, who will be integrated into project activities.

(1) Document Assembly and Automation

BALS will implement a firm-wide document management system, creating a centralized location, process, and procedure to access, create, and utilize client and court documents (forms, pleadings, letters, etc.). A required all-staff training in October will ensure that BALS employees are familiar with our TIG goals and objectives, and why firm-wide adoption of document automation is important to the organization’s mission and our clients. Once document storage and processing are centralized, the project will employ document assembly software Community.Lawyer to create templates and workflows that automate the document creation process. We will integrate Community.Lawyer with our case management system (CMS), LegalServer, so that various fields within the document will be populated with client case information already available in the CMS. This is a significant timesaver with every individual document and, over time, it will quickly pay off in more time and effort available for direct services to each client.

As part of this document automation process, BALS’ Project Lead has enlisted the assistance of Gregory T. Armstrong, Practice Group Director/Consumer Team for Inland Counties Legal Services (California). BALS and ICLS have a common goal in their 2020 LSC TIG projects: to connect document assembly software (i.e., Community.Lawyer) with LegalServer through a database integration API – to make the production of client and court documents as easy and efficient as possible for advocates and staff. Our two firms share the premise that improved process will free up advocate and staff time and firm resources, so the organizations can add value to where it matters most – improving client service.

Project Lead David Gray first will work with BALS staff and advocates individually and in small groups (anticipated to be part of regular team meetings in person and/or via Zoom) to identify priority documents to automate. Out of these meetings and direct staff feedback, the project’s next step will be to develop new document templates and improved workflows. Project Lead will work with document assembly software and case management software vendors to establish systems integration, and subsequently will conduct usability testing and make modifications based on advocate and staff feedback.

Legal Services Corporation	Technology Initiative Grants
Bay Area Legal Services, Inc. (610050)	TIG # 20001

All applicable staff will receive training on the use of the project’s new automated documents and will provide feedback through surveys or interviews. These new processes will be assessed, and an analysis of the document automation project results and potential for replication will be published.

(2) Business Process Improvement (BPI)

Through ongoing and transparent use of BPI, this TIG project is intended to create a core culture of continuous improvement embraced by staff as key stakeholders – to serve our thousands of clients better. This goal aligns directly with BALS’ strategic plan and stated mission of increasing access to justice – a prime value for LSC as well. In line with LSC’s goals for TIG awards, our TIG project will embed in BALS’ daily operations the emerging technologies and related best practices these grants encourage to improve legal aid services and client outcomes.

BALS will implement coordinated BPI activities to accomplish this project through staff education, individual and team training, and BPI pilot projects such as pro bono attorney engagement, advocate timekeeping, and staff onboarding to gain trust, adoption, and buy-in by all staff and advocates, and pro bono volunteers. BALS has committed to this path by employing a full-time BPI/Project Manager with the understanding that changing internal processes through new technologies requires time and focus to stand up and sustain the staff buy-in that makes these systems work. Often, without this fundamental staff involvement, organizations’ technology solutions go ignored or underutilized – full staff engagement and adoption of newly-introduced technologies are of central importance to BALS.

The project’s first BPI objective is firm-wide BPI education/training. Project Lead David Gray will create BPI training materials based on his professional BPI training experience and best practices within the legal aid community. He will meet with BALS teams (based on office locations and/or programs) to educate/train advocates and staff on BPI practices. Participating advocates and staff will provide feedback through surveys or interviews, which the Project Lead will use for project analysis and improvements.

Next, we identify two hands-on BPI pilot projects. BPI meetings with teams and individual staff will generate targets for hands-on BPI pilot projects. Project Lead David Gray will work with advocates and staff on these two hands-on pilots and implement new BALS processes based on the project outcomes.

All applicable staff will get training on the new BPI processes and again, participating advocates and staff will provide feedback through surveys or interviews, which will be used to inform the project and BALS process designs. The new BPI processes will be assessed, and an analysis of pilot project results and potential for replication will be published.

Both of these project initiatives will incorporate periodic internal evaluation (i.e., staff/participant surveys, interviews, database outputs) and be part of the formal external evaluation at the project’s end. Interim feedback responses and project analyses during implementation will be applied to improvements along the way and will be part of ongoing project transparency.

As indicated in the project budget, BALS has secured the pro bono participation of six highly-qualified professionals, including one Board member, willing to act as mentors or collaborators whose related experience and diverse perspectives we will leverage for the proposed project: Catherine Alman MacDonagh, Founder and CEO at Legal Lean Sigma Institute, a legal process improvement and project management consulting and training firm; Peter Hitson, Director of Legal Project and Practice Management at Carlton Fields, an Am Law 200 firm and BALS supporter; Ben Macre, VP & General Manager at GA Telesis MRO Services, a global aviation maintenance company; Jeff Cox, BALS Board member and Director of Content and Data Acquisition at UniCourt, a legal technology company; Joseph

Legal Services Corporation	Technology Initiative Grants
Bay Area Legal Services, Inc. (610050)	TIG # 20001

Schieffer, Founder and Project Manager at A2J Tech, an access to justice technology company; Ilenia Sanchez-Bryson, CIO at Legal Services of Greater Miami, a fellow legal aid and BALS collaborator; and Amy Burns, Deputy Director at Florida Rural Legal Services, a fellow legal aid and BALS collaborator.

Working internally and with these external collaborators, this TIG project aspires to create important firm-wide changes in work culture and applied technologies. We intend that BALS' diverse staff of 130-plus (approximately one-half are attorneys) will serve as an excellent test case for other legal aid organizations of any size looking to do the same. Project-related information and materials will be made available via multiple platforms, and the Project Lead's role includes serving as a resource to other legal aid organizations during and after the project period.