
Presidential Documents

Title 3—

Memorandum of May 18, 2021

The President

Restoring the Department of Justice's Access-to-Justice Function and Reinvigorating the White House Legal Aid Interagency Roundtable

Memorandum for the Heads of Executive Departments and Agencies

By the authority vested in me as President by the Constitution and the laws of the United States of America, and in order to increase meaningful access to our legal system and an array of Federal programs, it is hereby ordered as follows:

Section 1. Policy. This Nation was founded on the ideal of equal justice under the law. Everyone in this country should be able to vindicate their rights and avail themselves of the protections that our laws afford on equal footing. Whether we realize this ideal hinges on the extent to which everyone in the United States has meaningful access to our legal system. Legal services are crucial to the fair and effective administration of our laws and public programs, and the stability of our society.

Recognizing the importance of access to justice and the power of legal aid, the Department of Justice (DOJ) in 2010 launched an access-to-justice initiative. In 2016, DOJ formally established the Office for Access to Justice. This office worked in partnership with other DOJ components to coordinate policy initiatives on topics including criminal indigent defense, enforcement of fines and fees, language barriers in access to the courts, and civil legal aid. The DOJ and the White House Domestic Policy Council also launched the Legal Aid Interagency Roundtable (LAIR) in 2012 to work with civil legal aid partners to advance Federal programs; create and disseminate tools to provide information about civil legal aid and Federal funding opportunities; and generate research to inform policy that improves access to justice.

The LAIR's successes prompted President Obama to issue the memorandum of September 24, 2015 (Establishment of the White House Legal Aid Interagency Roundtable), which formally established LAIR as a White House initiative. Using the White House's convening power, LAIR examined innovative and evidence-based solutions for access to justice, from medical-legal partnerships to improve health outcomes and decrease health costs to better procedures in court hearings for individuals representing themselves.

But there is much more for the Federal Government to do. According to a 2017 study by the Legal Services Corporation, low-income Americans receive inadequate or no professional legal assistance with regard to over 80 percent of the civil legal problems they face in a given year. All too often, unaddressed legal issues push people into poverty. At the same time, in the criminal legal system, those who cannot afford private counsel often receive a lower-quality defense because public defender caseloads are overburdened.

The coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic has further exposed and exacerbated inequities in our justice system, as courts and legal service providers have been forced to curtail in-person operations, often without the resources or technology to offer remote-access or other safe alternatives. These access limitations have compounded the effects of other harms wrought by the pandemic. These problems have touched the lives of many persons in this country, particularly low-income people and people of color.

With these immense and urgent challenges comes the opportunity to strengthen access to justice in the 21st century. Through funding, interagency collaboration, and strategic partnerships, the Federal Government can drive development of new approaches and best practices that provide meaningful access to justice today, and into the future, consistent with our foundational ideal of equal justice under the law.

Sec. 2. *The Department of Justice's Access-to-Justice Function.* (a) My Administration is committed to promoting equal access to justice and addressing access limitations throughout the criminal and civil legal systems. The DOJ has a critical role to play in improving the justice delivery systems that serve people who cannot afford lawyers, and I am committed to reinvigorating that work.

(b) The Attorney General shall consider expanding DOJ's planning, development, and coordination of access-to-justice policy initiatives, including in the areas of criminal indigent defense, civil legal aid, and pro bono legal services. As soon as practicable, and no later than 120 days from the date of this memorandum, the Attorney General shall—in coordination with the Director of the Office of Management and Budget—submit a report to the President describing the Department's plan to expand its access-to-justice function, including the organizational placement of this function within the Department, expected staffing and budget, and, if necessary, the timeline for notifying the Congress of any reorganization.

Sec. 3. *Reinvigorating the White House Legal Aid Interagency Roundtable.* My Administration is committed to ensuring that all persons in this country enjoy the protections and benefits of our legal system. Reinvigorating LAIR as a White House initiative is a key step in this direction.

Accordingly, I direct as follows:

(a) The LAIR is hereby reconvened as a White House initiative in furtherance of the vision set forth in the memorandum of September 24, 2015, by which it was established and in light of today's most pressing challenges. The September 2015 memorandum is superseded to the extent that it is inconsistent with this memorandum.

(b) The LAIR shall work across executive departments, agencies, and offices to fulfill its mission, including to:

(i) improve coordination among Federal programs, so that programs are more efficient and produce better outcomes by including, where appropriate, legal services among the range of supportive services provided;

(ii) increase the availability of meaningful access to justice for individuals and families, regardless of wealth or status;

(iii) develop policy recommendations that improve access to justice in Federal, State, local, Tribal, and international jurisdictions;

(iv) assist the United States with implementation of Goal 16 of the United Nation's 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development to promote peaceful and inclusive societies for sustainable development, provide access to justice for all, and build effective, accountable, and inclusive institutions at all levels; and

(v) advance relevant evidence-based research, data collection, and analysis of civil legal aid and indigent defense, and promulgate best practices.

(c) The Attorney General and the Counsel to the President, or their designees, shall serve as the Co-Chairs of LAIR, which shall also include a representative or designee from each of the following executive departments, agencies, and offices:

(i) the Department of State;

(ii) the Department of the Treasury;

(iii) the Department of Defense;

(iv) the Department of Justice;

(v) the Department of the Interior;

- (vi) the Department of Agriculture;
- (vii) the Department of Labor;
- (viii) the Department of Health and Human Services;
- (ix) the Department of Housing and Urban Development;
- (x) the Department of Transportation;
- (xi) the Department of Education;
- (xii) the Department of Veterans Affairs;
- (xiii) the Department of Homeland Security;
- (xiv) the Environmental Protection Agency;
- (xv) the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission;
- (xvi) the Corporation for National and Community Service;
- (xvii) the Office of Management and Budget;
- (xviii) the United States Agency for International Development;
- (xix) the Administrative Conference of the United States;
- (xx) the National Science Foundation;
- (xxi) the United States Digital Service;
- (xxii) the Domestic Policy Council;
- (xxiii) the Office of the Vice President; and
- (xxiv) such other executive departments, agencies, and offices as the Co-Chairs may, from time to time, invite to participate.

(d) The Co-Chairs shall invite the participation of the Bureau of Consumer Financial Protection, the Federal Communications Commission, the Federal Trade Commission, the Legal Services Corporation, and the Social Security Administration, to the extent consistent with their respective statutory authorities and legal obligations.

(e) The LAIR shall report annually to the President on its progress in fulfilling its mission. The report shall include data from participating members on the deployment of Federal resources to foster this mission. The LAIR's 2021 report shall be due no later than 120 days from the date of this memorandum.

(f) In light of the mission and function set forth in section 3(b) of this memorandum, LAIR shall focus its first annual report on the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on access to justice in both the criminal and civil legal systems. Moreover, the first convening of LAIR shall, at a minimum, address access-to-justice challenges the pandemic has raised and work towards identifying technological and other solutions that both meet these challenges and fortify the justice system's capacity to serve the public and be inclusive of all communities.

(g) The Attorney General shall designate an Executive Director of LAIR who shall, as directed by the Co-Chairs, convene regular meetings of LAIR and supervise its work. The DOJ staff designated to support the Department's access-to-justice function under section 2 of this memorandum shall serve as the staff of LAIR.

(h) The DOJ shall, to the extent permitted by law and subject to the availability of appropriations, provide administrative services, funds, facilities, staff, equipment, and other support services as may be necessary for LAIR to carry out its mission.

(i) The LAIR shall hold meetings at least three times per year. In the course of its work, LAIR should conduct outreach to Federal, State, local, Tribal, and international officials, technical advisors, and nongovernmental organizations, among others, as necessary to carry out its mission (including public defender organizations and offices and legal aid organizations and providers).

(j) The LAIR members are encouraged to provide support, including by detailing personnel, to LAIR. Members of LAIR shall serve without any additional compensation for their work.

Sec. 4. General Provisions. (a) Nothing in this memorandum shall be construed to impair or otherwise affect:

(i) the authority granted by law to an executive department or agency, or the head thereof; or

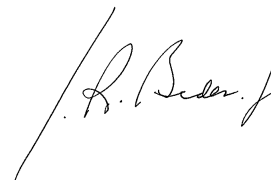
(ii) the functions of the Director of the Office of Management and Budget relating to budgetary, administrative, or legislative proposals.

(b) This memorandum shall be implemented consistent with applicable law and subject to the availability of appropriations.

(c) Independent agencies are strongly encouraged to comply with the provisions in this memorandum.

(d) This memorandum is not intended to, and does not, create any right or benefit, substantive or procedural, enforceable at law or in equity by any party against the United States, its departments, agencies, or entities, its officers, employees, or agents, or any other person.

(e) The Attorney General is authorized and directed to publish this memorandum in the *Federal Register*.



THE WHITE HOUSE,
Washington, May 18, 2021