

**Name of Organization:** Safe Streets/Strong Communities  
(Juvenile Justice Project of Louisiana serving as fiscal agent)

**Tax Status:** Awaiting 501(c)(3) designation

**Purpose of Grant:** To conduct public education, organize constituent communities, and advocate for criminal justice policies and practices in New Orleans that are smart, fair, equitable, and just and responsive to constituent community interests and needs

**Previous OSI Support:** None

**Organizational Budget:** \$362,558

**Project Budget:** \$200,000

**Sources of Support:** \$50,000 Marguerite Casey Foundation; \$45,000 Juvenile Justice Project of Louisiana; \$25,000 Youth Justice Funding Collaborative; \$10,000 Rockefeller Foundation

**Amount Requested:** \$200,000

**Amount Recommended:** \$200,000 (The After Prison Initiative, T1: 24013)

**Term:** 2 years

**Matching Requirements:** None

**Description of Organization:**

Safe Streets/Strong Communities (Safe Streets) was created in 2005, post-Katrina, when a group of fifty progressive activists, representing a coalition of national, regional, and local organizations,<sup>1</sup> met to discuss the future of justice in New Orleans. To assure that the City's justice policies and practices going forward are community-driven and responsive to residents' needs, Safe Streets organizes people from poor communities and communities of color in New Orleans. Safe Streets also forges alliances with mainstream organizations to support and press for creation of a criminal justice system that is fair, just, and accountable and that contributes to, rather than threatens, neighborhood safety and well-being. Through its organizing, coalition building, public education, advocacy, and litigation, Safe Streets works to adapt national "lessons learned" in justice reform to local realities and needs with the goal of creating safe streets and strong communities for all New Orleans residents, regardless of race or class.

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<sup>1</sup> Including the Juvenile Justice Project of Louisiana, Families and Friends of Louisiana's Incarcerated Children, Fairness for Prisoners Families, Voice of the Ex-Offender (VOTE), Innocence Project New Orleans, New Orleans Worker Justice Coalition, Louisiana Capital Assistance Center, American Civil Liberties Union of Louisiana, A Fighting Chance, Common Ground Collective, Orleans Parish Prison Reform Coalition, Orleans Public Defenders, Critical Resistance, The Justice Center, the Southern Center for Human Rights, the NAACP Legal Defense and Education Fund, and the ACLU-National Prison Project.

In addition to providing important in-kind support in the form of office space and staffing while Safe Streets establishes itself as an independent, 501(c)(3) organization, the Juvenile Justice Project of Louisiana (JJPL) serves as the organization's fiscal agent. An OSI grantee since 2000, JJPL was founded in 1997 by former Southern Center for Human Rights staff attorney David Utter as a broad-based community defender program with a mission to work with youth, families, and communities to reform the Louisiana juvenile justice system. Because JJPL is an established OSI grantee in good standing, has a close and strong relationship with Safe Streets, and has earned the respect of policymakers in Louisiana and the admiration of juvenile and adult justice advocates nationally, we believe this is a good fit and are confident in JJPL's ability to serve as fiscal agent.

### **Description of the Project for Which Funding Is Sought:**

Safe Streets/Strong Communities requests project funding to address the chronic corruption, mismanagement, violence and priority drift that has historically characterized the New Orleans Police Department, its parish jails, and court system. Safe Streets' current activities include: 1) working with the City Council to establish an independent monitor for the police department; 2) advocating for downsizing the Orleans Parish Prison (OPP) population and transferring its budget and operations from the jurisdiction and oversight of the Parish Sheriff to the City; 3) working with the criminal court judges and Orleans Indigent Defense Board to plan, create, and fund a model indigent defense office to provide quality and timely representation to defendants; and 4) working with Catholic Charities to launch and sustain the newly funded and established New Orleans Civic Justice Corps.

In support of and beyond these current efforts, Safe Streets will employ a variety of organizing and education strategies to make sure that affected constituents continue to be informed about justice system developments and have the capacity and will to make their voices and opinions heard. Outreach and recruitment tactics include door-to-door canvassing, targeted print and broadcast media, newsletters to residents (in the community and incarcerated), regular meetings and events and deliberate outreach to and involvement of faith-based institutions. Skills building and policy analysis trainings (around rights, advocacy, organizing, media, and litigation) and participation of Safe Streets members in national conferences will help develop and grow leadership capacity. Public education tactics include community teach-ins and best-practices workshops and production and dissemination of advocacy handbooks and justice fact sheets. Coalition building and consistent and determined policy advocacy (behind the scenes as well as through membership and participation in the City Council's Crime Summit Working Group), along with media advocacy such as press events around its reports or current events, writing opeds and pitching stories to editorial board meetings, will be used to influence and educate decision makers and the public in the interest of promoting smart justice policies.

### **Rationale for Recommendation:**

It is no secret that long before hurricanes Katrina and Rita and the disastrous government failures in Louisiana and the Gulf Region that followed, the police, judicial, and jail systems in New Orleans had been rife with corruption and violence and its justice infrastructure (particularly its lack of an indigent defense system) characterized by dysfunction, patronage, and inadequate financing, training, and commitment to justice. With one of the country's largest prison systems, the Louisiana criminal justice system has cycled large numbers of men and women—largely from New Orleans and disproportionately poor and of color—in and out of the state's plantation-style prisons. These institutions, individually and collectively, are classic examples of the kind of

structural racism that is embedded in and perpetuated by justice policies and practices throughout the country.

Almost immediately after Katrina and in the face of the federal, state, and local governments' glaring ineptitude, many of us became concerned that rescue and reconstruction efforts would ignore the implications of these dual disasters for criminal justice populations and institutions. Indeed, despite the numbers of people still incarcerated awaiting trial, the destruction of their homes and displacement and impoverishment of their families, the paucity of defense attorneys, the physical conditions of jails, a severely diminished, demoralized and disaffected police force and debilitated court system, to say nothing of the large numbers of people returning to New Orleans from state prisons, the important challenges posed by these realities were simply not—as we had feared—factored into the numerous “plans” for rebuilding school, healthcare, housing, and employment systems or the city’s infrastructure. Recently, the City Council contracted with the Vera Institute of Justice to make recommendations for major reforms to the City’s criminal justice system. On Monday, June 11<sup>th</sup>, Vera presented to the Criminal Justice Subcommittee of the New Orleans City Council, along with Columbia architect and OSI grantee Laura Kurgan, its recommendations for reconstituting basic justice services in New Orleans, which include justice reinvestment strategies; expanded community service opportunities, such as the Civic Justice Corps<sup>2</sup>; early case assessment and triage; a wider range of pre-trial release options; less punitive sanctions for municipal offenses; and increased opportunities for community-based alternatives to detention. Safe Streets will be essential for educating the public about the urgency of these reforms and modernization strategies, which the Subcommittee—chaired by James Carter—voted to adopt and recommend to the full City Council for implementation. Safe Streets’ co-director, Norris Henderson, as well as Soros Justice Fellow and Safe Streets Outreach and Investigations Coordinator Ursula Price, both of whom have strong relationships with Chairman Carter, also testified.

As far as we can tell, Safe Streets is the only indigenous, organic, grassroots coalition which has come together to focus specifically on criminal justice issues in New Orleans and how they exacerbate barriers to affordable housing, jobs, healthcare and education. Safe Streets has kept its attention on current law enforcement and court practices and is organizing constituent communities to be part of the debate and insist that justice polices, practices, and institutions and recruited personnel are responsive to community interests and needs and incorporate best practices from around the country.

The staff of Safe Streets, cobbled-together in the wake of the emergency and led by led by Norris Henderson and Rosana Cruz, managed to achieve a great deal while struggling themselves, along with their own families and neighbors, to deal with the effects of Katrina and its aftermath. Despite the chaos and uncertainty of the environment, Safe Streets has managed, in little more than one year, to make significant progress in marshalling community support, building a strong reform coalition, re-framing the media debate, and effecting policy change. The organization partnered with the Southern Center for Human Rights to investigate “evacuation” of over 6000 people from Orleans Parish Prison (OPP)<sup>3</sup> and facilitate their access to legal counsel. Together they interviewed over 100 pre-trial detainees and released a report exposing the unconstitutionality of their detainment and treatment. Their efforts to replace the Orleans

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<sup>2</sup> The Cornerstone Builders, the New Orleans CJC, was launched last month with funding from Louisiana’s State Americorps; the Corps Network has been unofficially notified of a new \$4.5 million grant from the Department of Labor (not yet public) to bring the CJC to scale in New Orleans.

<sup>3</sup> Orleans Parish Prison is actually the City’s jail, a complex of over 13 different facilities run by the New Orleans County Sheriff.

Indigent Defender Board and have a strong reformer hired as Executive Director were successful, as were efforts to have the Governor increase the state's allocation for indigent defense from \$10 million to \$20 million. To assure transparency, Safe Streets organized over 150 community members to attend three City Council hearings in the spring of 2006, 15 of whom testified to abuses at the hands of the New Orleans Police Department. Media coverage of this event helped secure a resolution in support of creating and funding an Office of the Independent Monitor. Safe Streets helped reshape the City Council's Crime Summit to include national experts and to negotiate a contract with the Vera Institute for its assistance.

The importance of the majority of Safe Streets' staff being from and living in New Orleans cannot be over-estimated. They are politically savvy group who know the local players: which policymakers, political and community "leaders" can be trusted and which have their own agendas. They have years of experience *with* and/or *in* the City's and State's criminal justice system and have also studied, worked with and been exposed to best practices from around the country. Safe Streets staff have been invaluable guides and interpreters of the city's physical and political terrain for the numerous outside experts and consultants (including Vera, Columbia University professors and others) who have descended on New Orleans with their ideas and plans, desperately needing to be grounded in the city's cultural and political realities. Perhaps equally important from OSI's perspective, Safe Streets staff is committed to open society values and to shepherding development of an honest, fair, and transparent justice system in New Orleans.

As its name suggests, Safe Streets/Strong Communities is also committed to keeping the peace among and between various New Orleans communities, helping to deflect neighborhood tensions and reduce the risk of violence, which are understandably real and omnipresent given the circumstances. Safe Streets' credibility with the various New Orleans communities has helped create better understanding between and among often distrustful and fearful groups and, by bringing together residents from different neighborhoods with political and criminal justice professionals, they are building new and perhaps unlikely alliances for a better, more fair, and just New Orleans. Still, press accounts of neighborhood violence are often exaggerated and distorted and Safe Streets plays an important role in bringing context to the often pejorative, racialized, and sensationalized media stories, providing an important antidote to more usual Anderson Cooper lens of white privilege being disseminated locally and nationally.

For all these reasons, we strongly recommend a grant in the amount of \$200,000 over two years to Safe Streets/Strong Communities from The After Prison Initiative's grantmaking budget. Depending on developments in New Orleans, we may want to recommend additional funding before the end of the grant period.