



The BCJI Fiscal Agent: Selection and Management Guidance for Local Leaders

When launching a comprehensive crime reduction effort like the Byrne Criminal Justice Innovation (BCJI) program, selecting a fiscal agent is one of the first influential decisions that local leaders have to make. A fiscal agent can be any established organization, government agency, nonprofit, law enforcement entity or social service agency that can adhere to the requirements and regulations outlined in the BCJI competitive grant announcement. How should a site decide which organization takes this role?

Drawing upon the experience of the Local Initiatives Support Corporation (LISC) as well as interviews with staff from a variety of BCJI sites, this paper is designed to share lessons and insights to help local leaders lay the foundation needed to ensure BCJI programmatic success.

A Critical Choice

In a survey of BCJI sites across the country, a clear majority indicated that the type of entity chosen to coordinate the project was one of the most important factors in determining programmatic success. While local site leaders agree that making the right choice is critical, there isn't a consensus on what type of agency should ideally be the coordinator. Should a public agency, like the Police Department or Mayor's Office, serve in this capacity? Or should an independent non-profit entity, like a community development corporation or service organization, play this role?

The best coordination structure for a BCJI site is shaped by the local environment. Cities and communities vary in size, demographics, and the nature of local public safety issues. Local partners have different skills and resources, and jurisdictions employ diverse crime prevention, intervention and neighborhood revitalization strategies. All of these factors can influence which local organization would be best suited to coordinate BCJI work.

In the FY 2016 BCJI competitive grant announcement, eligible applicants included states, institutions of higher education, units of local government, non-profit organizations and federally recognized Indian tribal governments. Most applicants serve as both the fiscal agent for the grant and the coordinator, but in a few cases the BCJI sites found it appropriate to separate the project management and fiscal agent duties based on local needs.

Most important is that local leaders carefully consider the roles and responsibilities of a fiscal agent as outlined below and pursue a consensus on a structure that best aligns with program rules and priorities.

The BCJI Approach

These powerful themes run through all BCJI projects.

DATA-DRIVEN

BCJI targets crime hot spots – often streets, properties or public spaces in communities that have struggled with crime for years. Researchers are engaged in the day-to-day work, helping partners examine problems, assess evidence-based solutions, and monitor progress.



COMMUNITY-ORIENTED:

BCJI champions active roles for residents in identifying problems, selecting strategies and creating safe and healthy environments.



SPURS REVITALIZATION:

BCJI tackles problem properties, unsafe streets and parks, unemployment, transit barriers and service gaps related to crime.



BUILDS PARTNERSHIPS:

BCJI taps the resources of public, nonprofit and community leaders to bring more resources and different approaches to bear on longstanding crime challenges for lasting change.



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When a Partner Is Coordinator:

A Milwaukee Case Study

Some sites have found it beneficial for the BCJI fiscal agent to outsource the coordinating functions to another partner in the community. In some communities, historic issues between local residents and law enforcement or city agencies have fostered individual and community trauma that can make it difficult at the start of a new program for these organizations to gain the trust and involvement of community members – a critical component of effective comprehensive safety work.

When the Milwaukee Police Department secured a BCJI grant in 2012, the police and community partners made a strategic decision to place the project management and community engagement work with, United Methodist Children’s Services of Wisconsin, Inc., a community organization that had invested years building trust and relationships with local residents.

This partnership, in turn, provided the Police Department the needed space to design and examine their own strategies for increasing police legitimacy and building community trust. By empowering a well-known community organization to assign and supervise the coordinator – and then serve as the primary convener and communicator for the BCJI team – the Police Department circumvented some anticipated hurdles for a project that relied heavily on resident buy-in.

The downside of separating coordination responsibilities from the fiscal agent role is a more complicated management structure. It is important to clearly define roles, decision-making protocols and accountability lines to mitigate problems. Milwaukee managed this by establishing a leadership team that included both the Police Department and the United Methodist Children’s Services of Wisconsin, Inc., with roles described and governed by a Memorandum of Understanding.

Roles

Project Manager

The fiscal agent is responsible for the achievement of all BCJI goals and objectives, which means that it must establish processes to keep the cross-sector team’s activities on track. This typically includes convening regular meetings, distributing notes, and establishing communication and accountability frameworks with major partners.

In determining which entity would most effectively play this role, local leaders should consider their comparative preparedness to manage and supervise the project coordinator, whose leadership the entire initiative will undoubtedly depend on. Basic requirements include having a defined supervisory structure with clear lines of reporting, a performance monitoring system, fiscal stability, and a communications and technology infrastructure to enable the coordinator to work effectively and efficiently. Institutions such as local or state agencies, which have robust human capital structure, would appear to be well suited, although that may not always be the case. It is best to conduct a thorough review of the prospective fiscal agent’s management and supervision practices before making a final selection.

Some BCJI sites have found it valuable to include staff from the cross-sector partners in the process of interviewing and selecting a project coordinator. This can help ensure that the individual possesses the proficiencies, skills and aptitude required to effectively manage a multi-pronged model, and it can build support for the final candidate among the key partners. However, not all organizations are open to including “outsiders” in their human resource decisions in this way. Exploring early on whether a prospective fiscal agent would accept this kind of collaborative decision-making could help local leaders better understand constraints or biases that might shape the agency’s approach to coordination.

Fiscal Agent

Fiscal agency for the BCJI initiative requires managing budgets, disbursing funds to partners, maintaining documents and handling the reporting required for a federal grant. In selecting a fiscal agent, local leaders should evaluate the prospective entity’s ability to not only coordinate partnerships and implement program strategies, but also to demonstrate the ability to manage sub-grantees, manage fiscal audits, exercise sensible

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accounting practices and understand statutory and regulatory obligations.

Some community-based organizations managing BCJI grants said that it took time to become accustomed to BCJI's required fiscal and programmatic reporting systems, whereas police departments and other public agencies did not raise this issue, typically because they were familiar with the systems from other federal grant awards.

Champion of the Comprehensive Approach

The selected fiscal agent should have a clear understanding of the philosophy of developing comprehensive strategies around public safety and community revitalization and find value in this approach. An indicator of an agency's preparedness to facilitate this kind of work might include a history of partnership with major players in multiple sectors, which could include health, education, community development, housing, public safety, youth development, social services, transportation and public works.

In addition, local leaders might consider whether a prospective coordinating agency's mission encompasses a comprehensive vision, or whether its leaders have experience and credibility in building alliances outside their typical "lane" of work. By identifying organizations which currently do this well, your site will be ahead of the curve in the selection and screening process for a fiscal agent.

Responsibilities

Building a Strong Cross-Sector Team

Developing a productive cross-sector partnership is one of the central objectives of the BCJI program model, and so managing its ongoing work is one of the major responsibilities of the fiscal agent. The art of coal-

tion-building and partnership-stewardship requires a multitude of skill sets, in particular the ability to network, be influential and provide leadership. The fiscal agent must be capable of reaching out to and sustaining relationships with a broad mix of stakeholders that includes law enforcement, service providers, community developers and residents.

Surveyed BCJI sites indicated that the fiscal agent which experienced the most difficulty in this area were Mayor's offices, police departments and higher education institutions. This may be because community organizations and non-profits often coordinate their work with a broad range of community, public and private institutions out of fiscal necessity or due to demands from community members for more integrated approaches, and thus are accustomed to this approach. In some sites, political factors might impede a public agency's ability to hold other partners accountable or maintain relationships during staffing transitions prompted by changes in city or county administrations.

Managing the Research Partnership

As part of the cross-sector collaboration, BCJI sites work with research partners to conduct a broad examination of the drivers of crime around hot spots and to evaluate evidence-based or innovative strategies that could impact those drivers. The fiscal agent plays a critical role in developing the research partner relationship and proactively cultivating meaningful, productive and fruitful collaboration among members of the full cross-sector partnership team to implement research strategies. Likewise, the fiscal agent should actively assist in overseeing the relationship between their employee (the project coordinator) and their contracted partner (the researcher).

In LISC's survey, a number of community organizations selected to be the fiscal agent found that managing the research partner relationship was one of their most challenging responsibilities. In some cases, they didn't have an existing relationship or familiarity with data-driven programs. More public agencies already had that comfort with research processes, particularly those working with researchers through other Smart Suite programs administered by the Bureau of Justice Assistance. If they don't have existing ties, a prospective fiscal agent should exhibit an appetite to engage with the researcher and the ability to effectively navigate obstacles and facilitate open communication.

BCJI in Context: Smart Suite

BCJI is a component of the Bureau of Justice Assistance "Smart Suite" of programs. The heart of the Smart Suite is practitioner-researcher partnerships that use data, evidence and innovation to create strategies and interventions that are effective and economical. This data-driven approach helps jurisdictions understand the full nature and extent of the crime challenges they face and target resources to the highest priorities.

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BCJI Strategy Hallmark: Research Partnership

BCJI sites include research partners that examine drivers of crime in and around hot spots and recommend appropriate evidence-informed response strategies that have the support of community members.

Community Engagement

Without question, authentic community engagement can be one of the most challenging responsibilities BCJI sites assume, regardless of their coordinating structure. Real engagement is a process that takes time and requires “on the ground” commitments to grassroots mobilization, leadership development, place-based learning and an assortment of other strategies.

While coordinating agencies of all types face barriers in this work in high-crime neighborhoods, surveys conducted by LISC of BCJI sites across the country indicate that police departments, mayor’s offices, district attorney’s

BCJI Strategy Hallmark: Community Engagement

Authentically engaging community residents in decision-making and project implementation is a key part of the BCJI program model and one of its greatest strengths. Including residents in designing programs and projects is an effective way to develop community leadership and cohesion.

offices and higher education institutions have found it more challenging to effectively engage communities. In part this is because, unlike neighborhood organizations and non-profits, the missions of these entities is not centered around community engagement and mobilization.

Police and prosecutors involved with BCJI have also cited distrust of law enforcement and the criminal justice system as a barrier to effective resident engagement coordinated by their agencies. In sites led by mayor’s offices or other public entities, local partners have said that community members’ pre-existing disillusionment about government-led initiatives – including expectations of a “top down” process – may have thwarted engagement efforts.

Community-based organizations such as neighborhood development or service organizations tend to find authentic community engagement to be less of a struggle. Local leaders should still take care to examine how any group considered for the role of fiscal agent is perceived by people in the community, including assessing how mission and culture might affect the agency’s ability to directly pursue or oversee community partnerships.

A Decision Best Made With Partners

There is no single formula for selecting a fiscal agent that will guarantee success in a comprehensive crime reduction effort. Most important is that from the beginning of the process, key partners in the BCJI initiative discuss the various pros and cons of their chosen approach to coordination, weighing local dynamics against the requirements of this demanding role. Consider using the BCJI Fiscal Agent Selection Tool as a way to organize the options. Such discussions can serve to build collective understanding of the nuances of the BCJI model, while also helping local leaders identify how to support each other for successful planning and implementation.

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The BCJI Fiscal Agent Selection Tool

This checklist can help your site assess which agency or organization in your jurisdiction may be best positioned to serve as a BCJI fiscal agent. Consider the capabilities listed in the table for each of your options, ideally in discussion with partners. By considering the parameters of the BCJI model when choosing a fiscal agent, your site can steer away from unnecessary discord or disruptions throughout planning and implementation. For more details on these roles and responsibilities, see the guide “The BCJI Fiscal Agent.”

CAPABILITIES / COMPETENCIES	OPTION 1	OPTION 2
MANAGEMENT		
Project management capacity		
Fiscal management systems and skills		
Personnel management systems and protocols		
Experience managing cross-sector partnerships		
Flexibility to balance collaborative decision-making with internal agency structures		
COMPREHENSIVE APPROACH		
Mission aligns with a comprehensive approach to safety and revitalization		
Past or current work touches multiple sectors, i.e. social service, housing, public safety, health		
Demonstrated ability to bring new partners in to respond to emerging needs		
RESEARCH PROCESS		
Experience working with the chosen research partner(s)		
Experience with action research for other crime reduction or community building initiatives		
Appetite to develop research relationships and expertise through BCJI		
COMMUNITY RELATIONSHIPS		
Strong relationships and credibility with residents and other community leaders		
Institutional values and structure that will embrace community participation in BCJI		

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