Legal Research Assistant
Re-imagining Pretrial Justice Project

Location: Minneapolis, Minnesota; Remote/Hybrid option available
Compensation: $40/hour, 6-8 hours/week, 18-20 weeks
Industry: Criminal legal system/Research
Position Type: Hourly contract position

OVERVIEW
The Minnesota Justice Research Center (MNJRC) is a nonpartisan, nonprofit dedicated to driving meaningful change to Minnesota’s criminal legal system through rigorous and community-centered research, education, and policy development. Building off our current work, the MNJRC seeks to study pretrial release best practices in Minnesota and across the country. Based on this research and conversations with communities from across the state, MNJRC will provide legislative recommendations for advancing pretrial justice in Minnesota. A basic tenet of our judicial system is that all people, regardless of race, class, or identity, are presumed innocent until proven guilty of a crime in the court of law. Pretrial release practices should be aligned with the presumption of innocence (regardless of financial means or past behavior) while also serving the goals of ensuring reappearance in court and protecting public safety. Minnesota’s pretrial system falls far short of this legal expectation.

- Poverty, rather than public safety or court reappearance, frequently determines whether a defendant is held in custody, sometimes for months, while awaiting trial. Not surprisingly, these defendants have much less success in negotiating with prosecutors - with higher conviction rates and longer sentences - than defendants who are released.

- Pretrial detention results in serious legal, financial, and social hardships: Not only do they receive worse outcomes in court, jailed defendants cannot fulfill their parenting obligations and quickly accrue absences at work or school, with dire consequences.

- Pretrial detention leads to jail crowding and strains budgets. According to the Vera Institute of Justice, “Since 1970, the total jail population [in Minnesota] has increased 357% and much of this growth is driven by an increase in people in jail for pretrial detention.”

- Paying for bail drains wealth from low-income individuals, families, and communities and the pretrial process is an important driver of racial disparities in the criminal legal system.

What are the best practices for addressing these and other problems in the pretrial process? What would an ideal pretrial system in Minnesota look like? These are the central questions we seek to answer.
Our research will examine both tried-and-true practices and recent innovations that local, state, and federal jurisdictions have developed for reducing costly pretrial detention of low-risk defendants, monitoring and assisting released defendants, addressing victims’ needs and concerns, and reducing disparities based on race and economic status.

We will connect our analysis with the legal landscape in Minnesota and to community perspectives to offer recommendations to the legislature on how we can move our system toward a better administration of pretrial justice.

RESPONSIBILITIES
The Legal Research Assistant (Legal RA) will be responsible for assisting the Project Manager with the following tasks:

- Literature review and legal research related to the following subjects:
  - History of bail law in the United States and Minnesota
  - United States Supreme Court and other federal court case law regarding bail and pretrial detention
  - Minnesota Supreme Court and other appellate court case law regarding bail and pretrial detention
  - Court rules and statutes governing bail and pretrial detention
- Assessing various potential policy recommendations for their constitutionality under current MN case law and Constitution
- Drafting and editing research reports
- Working in partnership with policy and education staff at the MNJRC to develop outreach and policy materials.

QUALIFICATIONS
- Bachelor’s Degree (BA or BS)
- Second or third year student enrolled in a J.D. program at ABA-accredited law school
- Reliable computer access and internet
- Strong legal research skills, including experience with Westlaw and other legal search engines
- Strong legal analysis and writing, including the ability to analogize and distinguish between cases, statutes, and other precedents
- Deep attention to detail and strong organizational skills
- Ability to work as part of a team in a dynamic environment

TO APPLY
Please send a letter of interest, resume, and writing sample to Anna Hall, Project Manager, at anna@mnjrc.org.