

Baltimore tapped for domestic violence pilot program

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Baltimore is one of two cities picked for a new pilot initiative that brings victims of domestic violence better access to legal representation.

The project, which was announced Wednesday, was launched by Vice President Joe Biden's office and the U.S. Department of Justice Access to Justice Commission.

Details of the program have not been nailed down, but key players here will include the University of Baltimore School of Law Family Law Clinic, the House of Ruth and law firm Venable LLP.

Also involved are the Maryland Access to Justice Commission and the Governor's Office on Crime Control and Prevention.

Venable will financially support the program, which will train one young lawyer at UB's Family Law Center to work for the House of Ruth representing victims of domestic violence.

"I think it's a big deal because Venable is making this commitment to provide an attorney who would not have been there otherwise," said Leigh Goodmark, director of the Family Law Clinic.

"We will educate someone in the Family Law Clinic who will have trial training, know what it means to represent a victim of domestic violence, who will [be] prepared to do that better than they would have otherwise," she said.

It is uncertain whether the attorney sponsored by Venable will be a deferred hire. Additional meetings between the program's players will be held in November.

The lawyer will work in the existing Protective Order Advocacy Representation Project operated by the House of Ruth at the U.S. District Court in Baltimore.

Biden's office hopes to replicate the idea once it is determined if the Baltimore- and New Orleans-based pilot programs work, according to court system representatives. The vice president's office did not respond to a request for comment on why Baltimore was chosen for the initiative.

The pilot programs were highlighted Wednesday at the White House at an event focusing on Domestic Violence Awareness month. Both Biden and President Barack Obama spoke at the event.

Retired Maryland Court of Appeals Judge Irma S. Raker, chair of the local Access to Justice Commission, said it was "very exciting" to be a part of the White House event that included "hands-on, grassroots people who are involved in protection from domestic violence."

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