Public Law 96-190
96th Congress

An Act

To provide financial assistance for the development and maintenance of effective, fair, inexpensive, and expeditious mechanisms for the resolution for minor disputes.

Feb. 12, 1980
[S. 423]

Be it enacted by the Senate and House of Representatives of the United States of America in Congress assembled,

Dispute Resolution Act.

SHORT TITLE

SECTION 1. This Act may be cited as the "Dispute Resolution Act". 28 USC app.

SEC. 2. (a) The Congress finds and declares that— 28 USC app.

(1) for the majority of Americans, mechanisms for the resolution of minor disputes are largely unavailable, inaccessible, ineffective, expensive, or unfair;

(2) the inadequacies of dispute resolution mechanisms in the United States have resulted in dissatisfaction and many types of inadequately resolved grievances and disputes;

(3) each individual dispute, such as that between neighbors, a consumer and seller, and a landlord and tenant, for which adequate resolution mechanisms do not exist may be of relatively small social or economic magnitude, but taken collectively such disputes are of enormous social and economic consequence;

(4) there is a lack of necessary resources or expertise in many areas of the Nation to develop new or improved consumer dispute resolution mechanisms, neighborhood dispute resolution mechanisms, and other necessary dispute resolution mechanisms;

(5) the inadequacy of dispute resolution mechanisms throughout the United States is contrary to the general welfare of the people;

(6) neighborhood, local, or community based dispute resolution mechanisms can provide and promote expeditious, inexpensive, equitable, and voluntary resolution of disputes, as well as serve as models for other dispute resolution mechanisms; and

(7) the utilization of neighborhood, local, or community resources, including volunteers (and particularly senior citizens) and available building space such as space in public facilities, can provide for accessible, cost-effective resolution of minor disputes.

(b) It is the purpose of this Act to assist the States and other interested parties in providing to all persons convenient access to dispute resolution mechanisms which are effective, fair, inexpensive, and expeditious.

DEFINITIONS

SEC. 3. For purposes of this Act— 28 USC app.

(1) the term "Advisory Board" means the Dispute Resolution Advisory Board established under section 7(a);

(2) the term "Attorney General" means the Attorney General of the United States (or the designee of the Attorney General of the United States);

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(3) the term "Center" means the Dispute Resolution Resource Center established under section 6(a);

(4) the term "dispute resolution mechanism" means—

(A) a court with jurisdiction over minor disputes;

(B) a forum which provides for arbitration, mediation, conciliation, or a similar procedure, which is available to resolve a minor dispute; or

(C) a governmental agency or mechanism with the objective of resolving minor disputes;

(5) the term "grant recipient" means any State or local government, any State or local governmental agency, and any nonprofit organization which receives a grant under section 8;

(6) the term "local" means of or pertaining to any political subdivision of a State; and

(7) the term "State" means the several States, the District of Columbia, the Commonwealth of Puerto Rico, or any of the territories and possessions of the United States.

CRITERIA FOR DISPUTE RESOLUTION MECHANISMS

28 USC app.

SEC. 4. Any grant recipient which desires to use any financial assistance received under this Act in connection with establishing or maintaining a dispute resolution mechanism shall provide satisfactory assurances to the Attorney General that the dispute resolution mechanism will provide for—

(1) assistance to persons using the dispute resolution mechanism;

(2) the resolution of disputes at times and locations which are convenient to persons the dispute resolution mechanism is intended to serve;

(3) adequate arrangements for participation by persons who are limited by language barriers or other disabilities;

(4) reasonable, fair, and readily understandable forms, rules, and procedures, which shall include, where appropriate, those which would—

(A) ensure that all parties to a dispute are directly involved in the resolution of the dispute, and that the resolution is adequately implemented;

(B) promote, where feasible, the voluntary resolution of disputes (including the resolution of disputes by the parties before resorting to the dispute resolution mechanism established by the grant recipient);

(C) promote the resolution of disputes by persons not ordinarily involved in the judicial system;

(D) provide an easy way for any person to determine the proper name in which, and the proper procedure by which, any person may be made a party to a dispute resolution proceeding;

(E) permit the use of dispute resolution mechanisms by the business community if State law so permits; and

(F) ensure reasonable privacy protection for individuals involved in the dispute resolution process;

(5) the dissemination of information relating to the availability, location, and use of other redress mechanisms in the event that dispute resolution efforts fail or the dispute involved does not come within the jurisdiction of the dispute resolution mechanism;

(6) consultation and cooperation with the community and with governmental agencies; and

(7) the establishment of programs or procedures for effectively, economically, and appropriately communicating to disputants the availability and location of the dispute resolution mechanism.

DEVELOPMENT OF DISPUTE RESOLUTION MECHANISMS BY STATES

28 USC app.

SEC. 5. Each State is hereby encouraged to develop—

(1) sufficient numbers and types of readily available dispute resolution mechanisms which meet the criteria established in section 4; and

Public information program.

(2) a public information program which effectively communicates to potential users the availability and location of such dispute resolution mechanisms.

ESTABLISHMENT OF PROGRAM; DISPUTE RESOLUTION RESOURCE CENTER

28 USC app.

SEC. 6. (a) The Attorney General shall establish a Dispute Resolution Program in the Department of Justice. Such program shall include establishment of a Dispute Resolution Resource Center and a Dispute Resolution Advisory Board and the provision of financial assistance under section 8.

Functions.

(b) The Center—

(1) shall serve as a national clearinghouse for the exchange of information concerning the improvement of existing dispute resolution mechanisms and the establishment of new dispute resolution mechanisms;

(2) shall provide technical assistance to State and local governments and to grant recipients to improve existing dispute resolution mechanisms and to establish new dispute resolution mechanisms;

(3) shall conduct research relating to the improvement of existing dispute resolution mechanisms and to the establishment of new dispute resolution mechanisms, and shall encourage the development of new dispute resolution mechanisms;

Surveys.

(4) shall undertake comprehensive surveys of the various State and local governmental dispute resolution mechanisms and major privately operated dispute resolution mechanisms in the States, which shall determine—

(A) the nature, number, and location of dispute resolution mechanisms in each State;

(B) the annual expenditure and operating authority for each such mechanism;

(C) the existence of any program for informing the potential users of the availability of each such mechanism;

(D) an assessment of the present use of, and projected demand for, the services offered by each such mechanism; and

(E) other relevant data relating to the types of disputes addressed by each such mechanism including the average cost and time expended in resolving various types of disputes;

(5) shall identify, after consultation with the Advisory Board, those dispute resolution mechanisms or aspects thereof which—

(A) are most fair, expeditious, and inexpensive to all parties in the resolution of disputes; and

(B) are suitable for general adoption;

(6) shall make recommendations, after consultation with the Advisory Board, regarding the need for new or improved dispute resolution mechanisms and similar mechanisms;

(7) shall identify, after consultation with the Advisory Board, the types of minor disputes which are most amenable to resolution through specific dispute resolution techniques, in order to assist the Attorney General in determining the types of projects which shall receive financial assistance under section 8;

(8) shall, as soon as practicable after the date of the enactment of this Act, undertake an information program to advise potential grant recipients, and the chief executive officer, attorney general, and chief judicial officer of each State, of the availability of funds, and eligibility requirements, under this Act;

Grants and contracts.

(9) may make grants to, or enter into contracts with, to the extent or in such amounts as are provided in appropriation Acts, public agencies, institutions of higher education, and qualified persons to conduct research, demonstrations, or special projects designed to carry out the provisions of paragraphs (1) through (7); and

(10) in awarding such grants and entering into such contracts, shall have as one of its major priorities dispute resolution mechanisms that resolve consumer disputes.

(c) Upon request of the Center, the Community Relations Service of the Department of Justice and the Federal Mediation and Conciliation Service are authorized to assist the Center in performing its functions under this section.

Detailed Federal employees.

(d) Upon the request of the Attorney General, not more than a total of ten Federal employees from the various executive agencies (as defined in section 105 of title 5, United States Code) may be detailed to the Center to assist the Center to perform its functions under this Act. The head of any such agency, with the consent of the employee concerned, may enter into an agreement with the Attorney General to provide for the detail of any employee of his agency for a period of not more than five years, notwithstanding the time limitation contained in section 3341 of title 5, United States Code. An employee detailed under this section is considered, for the purpose of preserving his allowances, privileges, rights, seniority, and other benefits, an employee of the agency from which detailed. Such employee is entitled to pay, allowances, and other benefits from funds available to the agency from which such employee is detailed, except that the Department of Justice shall pay to such employee all travel expenses and allowances payable for services performed during the detail.

Travel expenses and allowances.

DISPUTE RESOLUTION ADVISORY BOARD

28 USC app.

SEC. 7. (a) The Attorney General shall establish a Dispute Resolution Advisory Board in the Department of Justice.

Functions.

(b) The Advisory Board shall—

(1) advise the Attorney General with respect to the administration of the Center under section 6 and the administration of the financial assistance program under section 8;

(2) consult with the Center in accordance with the provisions of section 6(b)(5), section 6(b)(6), and section 6(b)(7); and

(3) consult with the Attorney General in accordance with the provisions of sections 8(b)(4) and 9(d).

Membership.

(c)(1) The Advisory Board shall consist of nine members appointed by the Attorney General, and shall be composed of persons from State

governments, local governments, business organizations, the academic or research community, neighborhood organizations, community organizations, consumer organizations, the legal profession, and State courts.

(2) A vacancy in the Advisory Board shall be filled in the same manner as the original appointment. Vacancies.

(3)(A) Except as provided in subparagraph (B), members of the Advisory Board shall be appointed for terms which expire at the end of September 30, 1984. Terms.

(B) Any member appointed to fill a vacancy occurring before the expiration of the term for which the predecessor of such member was appointed shall be appointed only for the remainder of the term.

(d) While away from their homes or regular places of business in the performance of services for the Advisory Board, members of the Advisory Board shall be allowed travel expenses, including per diem in lieu of subsistence, in the same manner as persons employed intermittently in the Federal Government service are allowed expenses under section 5703 of title 5, United States Code. The members of the Advisory Board shall receive no compensation for their services except as provided in this subsection. Travel expenses and per diem.

(e) The Chairman of the Federal Trade Commission may advise and consult with the Attorney General, and may consult with the Center, regarding matters within its jurisdiction.

FINANCIAL ASSISTANCE

SEC. 8. (a) The Attorney General may provide financial assistance in the form of grants to applicants who have submitted, in accordance with subsection (c), applications for the purpose of improving existing dispute resolution mechanisms or establishing new dispute resolution mechanisms. 28 USC app.

(b) As soon as practicable after the date of the enactment of this Act, the Attorney General shall prescribe— Grant applications.

(1) the form and content of applications for financial assistance to be submitted in accordance with subsection (c);

(2) the time schedule for submission of such applications;

(3) the procedures for approval of such applications, and for notification to each State of financial assistance awarded to applicants in the State for any fiscal year;

(4) after consultation with the Advisory Board, the specific criteria for awarding grants to applicants under this section, which shall— Development of criteria.

(A) be consistent with the criteria established in section 4;

(B) take into account—

(i) the population and population density of the States in which applicants for financial assistance available under this section are located;

(ii) the financial need of States and localities in which such applicants are located;

(iii) the need in the State or locality involved for the type of dispute resolution mechanism proposed;

(iv) the national need for experience with the type of dispute resolution mechanism proposed; and

(v) the need for obtaining experience in each region of the Nation with dispute resolution mechanisms in a diversity of situations, including rural, suburban, and urban situations; and

(C) provide that one of the major priorities of the Attorney General shall be the funding of dispute resolution mechanisms that resolve consumer disputes;

Reports.

(5)(A) the form and content of such reports to be filed under this section as may be reasonably necessary to monitor compliance with the requirements of this Act and to evaluate the effectiveness of projects funded under this Act; and

(B) the procedures to be followed by the Attorney General in reviewing such reports;

(6) the manner in which financial assistance received under this section may be used, consistent with the purposes specified in subsection (e); and

Publication in Federal Register.

(7) procedures for publishing in the Federal Register a notice and summary of approved applications.

(c) Any State or local government, State or local governmental agency, or nonprofit organization shall be eligible to receive a grant for financial assistance under this section. Any such entity which desires to receive a grant under this section may submit an application to the Attorney General in accordance with the specific criteria established by the Attorney General under subsection (b)(4). Such application shall—

Application contents.

(1) set forth a proposed plan demonstrating the manner in which the financial assistance will be used—

(A) to establish a new dispute resolution mechanism which satisfies the criteria specified in section 4; or

(B) to improve an existing dispute resolution mechanism in order to bring such mechanism into compliance with such criteria;

(2) set forth the types of disputes to be resolved by the dispute resolution mechanism;

(3) identify the person responsible for administering the project set forth in the application;

(4) include an estimate of the cost of the proposed project;

(5) provide for the establishment of fiscal controls and fund accounting of Federal financial assistance received under this Act;

(6) provide for the submission of reports in such form and containing such information as the Attorney General may require under subsection (b)(5)(A);

(7) set forth the nature and extent of participation of interested parties, including representatives of those individuals whose disputes are to be resolved by the mechanism, in the development of the application; and

(8) describe the qualifications, period of service, and duties of persons who will be charged with resolving or assisting in the resolution of disputes.

(d) The Attorney General, in determining whether to approve any application for financial assistance to carry out a project under this section, shall give special consideration to projects which are likely to continue in operation after expiration of the grant made by the Attorney General.

Use of assistance funds.

(e)(1) Financial assistance available under this section may be used only for the following purposes—

(A) compensation of personnel engaged in the administration, adjudication, conciliation, or settlement of minor disputes, including personnel whose function is to assist in the preparation and resolution of claims and the collection of judgments;

(B) recruiting, organizing, training, and educating personnel described in subparagraph (A);

(C) improvement or leasing of buildings, rooms, and other facilities and equipment and leasing or purchase of vehicles needed to improve the settlement of minor disputes;

(D) continuing monitoring and study of the mechanisms and settlement procedures employed in the resolution of minor disputes in a State;

(E) research and development of effective, fair, inexpensive, and expeditious mechanisms and procedures for the resolution of minor disputes;

(F) sponsoring programs of nonprofit organizations to carry out any of the provisions of this paragraph; and

(G) other necessary expenditures directly related to the operation of new or improved dispute resolution mechanisms.

Restriction on financial assistance.

(2) Financial assistance available under this section may not be used for the compensation of attorneys for the representation of disputants or claimants or for otherwise providing assistance in any adversary capacity.

Notice of application to State officers.

(f)(1) In the case of an application for financial assistance under this section submitted by a local government or governmental agency, the Attorney General shall furnish notice of such application to the chief executive officer, attorney general, and chief judicial officer of the State in which such applicant is located at least thirty days before the approval of such application. The chief executive officer, attorney general, and chief judicial officer of the State shall be given an opportunity to submit written comments to the Attorney General regarding such application and the Attorney General shall take such comments into consideration in determining whether to approve such application.

(2) In the case of an application for financial assistance under this section submitted by a nonprofit organization, the Attorney General shall furnish notice of such application to the chief executive officer, attorney general, and chief judicial officer of the State in which the applicant is located and to the chief executive officers of the units of general local government in which such applicant is located at least thirty days before the approval of such application. The chief executive officer, attorney general, and chief judicial officer of the State, and the chief executive officers of the units of general local government shall be given an opportunity to submit written comments to the Attorney General regarding such application and the Attorney General shall take such comments into consideration in determining whether to approve such application.

Estimated project cost, disbursement.

(g)(1) Upon the approval of an application by the Attorney General under this section, the Attorney General shall disburse to the grant recipient involved such portion of the estimated cost of the approved project as the Attorney General considers appropriate, except that the amount of such disbursement shall be subject to the provisions of paragraph (2).

Federal share.

(2) The Federal share of the estimated cost of any project approved under this section shall not exceed—

(A) 100 per centum of the estimated cost of the project, for the first and second fiscal years for which funds are available for grants under this section;

(B) 75 per centum of the estimated cost of the project, for the third fiscal year for which funds are available for such grants; and

(C) 60 per centum of the estimated cost of the project, for the fourth fiscal year for which funds are available for such grants.

Payments.

(3) Payments made under this subsection may be made in installments, in advance, or by way of reimbursement, with necessary adjustments on account of underpayment or overpayment. Such payments shall not be used to compensate for any administrative expense incurred in submitting an application for a grant under this section.

(4) In the case of any State or local government, or State or local governmental agency, which desires to receive financial assistance under this section, such government or agency may not receive any such financial assistance for any fiscal year if its expenditure of non-Federal funds for other than nonrecurrent expenditures for the establishment and administration of dispute resolution mechanisms will be less than its expenditure for such purposes in the preceding fiscal year, unless the Attorney General determines that a reduction in expenditures is reasonable.

Notice and hearing on project compliance.

(h) Whenever the Attorney General, after giving reasonable notice and opportunity for hearing to any grant recipient, finds that the project for which such grant was received no longer complies with the provisions of this Act, or with the relevant application as approved by the Attorney General, the Attorney General shall notify such grant recipient of such findings and no further payments may be made to such grant recipient by the Attorney General until the Attorney General is satisfied that such noncompliance has been, or promptly will be, corrected. The Attorney General may authorize the continuance of payments with respect to any program pursuant to this Act which is being carried out by such grant recipient and which is not involved in the noncompliance.

Independent study, contract.

(i) The Attorney General, to the extent or in such amounts as are provided in appropriation Acts shall enter into a contract for an independent study of the Dispute Resolution Program. The study shall evaluate the performance of such program and determine its effectiveness in carrying out the purpose of this Act. The study shall contain such recommendations for additional legislation as may be appropriate, and shall include recommendations concerning the continuation or termination of the Dispute Resolution Program. Not later than April 1, 1984, the Attorney General shall make public and submit to each House of the Congress a report of the results of the study.

Report to Congress.

(j) No funds for assistance available under this section shall be expended until one year after the date of the enactment of this Act.

RECORDS; AUDIT; ANNUAL REPORT

28 USC app.

SEC. 9. (a) Each grant recipient shall keep such records as the Attorney General shall require, including records which fully disclose the amount and disposition by such grant recipient of the proceeds of such assistance, the total cost of the project or undertaking in connection with which such assistance is given or used, the amount of that portion of the project or undertaking supplied by other sources, and such other records as will assist in effective financial and performance audits.

Restriction on Attorney General's authority.

(b) The Attorney General shall have access for purposes of audit and examination to any relevant books, documents, papers, and records of grant recipients. The authority of the Attorney General under this subsection is restricted to compiling information necessary to the filing of the annual report required under this section. No

information revealed to the Attorney General pursuant to such audit and examination about an individual or business which has utilized the dispute resolution mechanism of a grant recipient may be used in, or disclosed for, any administrative, civil, or criminal action or investigation against the individual or business except in an action or investigation arising out of and directly related to the program being audited and examined.

Access to records by Comptroller General.

(c) The Comptroller General of the United States, or any duly authorized representatives of the Comptroller General, shall have access to any relevant books, documents, papers, and records of grant recipients until the expiration of three years after the final year of the recipient of any financial assistance under this Act, for the purpose of financial and performance audits and examination.

Report to President and Congress.

(d) The Attorney General, in consultation with the Advisory Board shall submit to the President and the Congress not later than one year after the date of the enactment of this Act, and on or before February 1 of each succeeding year, a report relating to the administration of this Act during the preceding fiscal year. Such report shall include—

(1) a list of all grants awarded;

(2) a summary of any actions undertaken in accordance with section 8(h);

(3) a listing of the projects undertaken during such fiscal year and the types of other dispute resolution mechanisms which are being created, and, to the extent feasible, a statement as to the success of all mechanisms in achieving the purpose of this Act;

(4) the results of financial and performance audits conducted under this section; and

(5) an evaluation of the effectiveness of the Center in implementing this Act, including a detailed analysis of the extent to which the purpose of this Act has been achieved, together with recommendations with respect to whether and when the program should be terminated and any recommendations for additional legislation or other action.

AUTHORIZATION OF APPROPRIATIONS

28 USC app.

SEC. 10. (a) To carry out the provisions of section 6 and section 7, there is authorized, to be appropriated to the Attorney General $1,000,000 for each of the fiscal years 1980, 1981, 1982, 1983, and 1984.

(b) To carry out the provisions of section 8, there is authorized to be appropriated to the Attorney General $10,000,000 for each of the fiscal years 1981, 1982, 1983, and 1984.

(c) Sums appropriated under this section are authorized to remain available until expended.

Approved February 12, 1980.

LEGISLATIVE HISTORY:

HOUSE REPORT: No. 96-492, Pt. 1 (Comm. on Interstate and Foreign Commerce) and Pt. 2 (Comm. on the Judiciary).

CONGRESSIONAL RECORD:

Vol. 125 (1979): Apr. 5, considered and passed Senate.
Dec. 10-12, considered and passed House, amended.
Vol. 126 (1980): Jan. 30, Senate concurred in House amendments.

WEEKLY COMPILATION OF PRESIDENTIAL DOCUMENTS:

Vol. 16, No. 7 (1980): Feb. 12, Presidential statement.