

IIPSJ Response to the Request of the USPTO for Comments on Community Outreach Office Locations in the Southeast Region

March 30, 2026

The following comments are submitted in response to the Request of the United States Patent and Trademark Office (USPTO) [Docket No. PTO-C-2026-0100] which is seeking information to consider in connection with the selection of locations for one or more community outreach offices (COOs) in the Southeast Region, which the USPTO was directed to establish under the Unleashing American Innovators Act of 2022 (UAIA).¹ This region includes Virginia, North Carolina, South Carolina, Georgia, Florida, Tennessee, Alabama, Mississippi, Louisiana, and Arkansas.

Commenter Information

These comments are submitted by the Institute for Intellectual Property and Social Justice (IIPSJ), a not-for-profit non-governmental organization established to promote social justice in the field of intellectual property law and practice, which prioritizes, among other things, achieving the broadest possible participation of all Americans in the IP ecosystem. Advocating for core principles of socially equitable access, inclusion, and empowerment in the structure and implementation of the IP legal regime, IIPSJ's work includes scholarly examination of IP law through the IP social justice rationale; advocacy for social justice in the shaping and implementation of IP law and policy; initiatives to increase the breadth of participation in IP legal practice; and programs which promote greater awareness and understanding of IP protection, particularly among historically and currently underserved geographical regions, communities, and groups.

Summary of IIPSJ's Comments

Through the UAIA, Congress effectuates a number of specific social justice obligations and effects that are inherent and essential to IP legal protection. Despite the critical importance of IP to the national interest, there are many Americans, particularly in certain geographic regions as well as in various marginalized communities, who do not fully participate in the IP ecosystem. Whether due to a lack of IP awareness and education or equitable opportunities to engage in IP endeavor, the IP potential of these prospective innovators, creators, and entrepreneurs remains largely untapped. To address this and related social justice deficiencies in our IP infrastructure, the UAIA enacted a number of remedial measures, including the Act's directive to the USPTO to establish the COOs.

IIPSJ highly commends the USPTO's ongoing effort to fulfill the UAIA mandate, as well as the Office's independent commitment to expanding its outreach and support to innovators throughout the Southeast Region, an area which is currently underserved by the American IP ecosystem. In support of the USPTO's initiative, IIPSJ submits the following comments which offer guiding principles and practical objectives in connection with the establishment of the Southeast Region COOs, which IIPSJ believes will promote the overarching goals of the UAIA. Through adherence to these principles and objectives, the Southeast COOs will be better able to strategically implement concrete IP awareness,

¹ Unleashing American Innovators Act of 2022, S.2773.

education, and outreach initiatives, expand the commonwealth of patent stakeholders, and thereby enhance the opportunities for innovation entrepreneurship and related socio-economic advancement and otherwise achieve immediate and transformative impacts throughout the Southeast Region.

As detailed below, IIPJSJ believes that the goals of the UAIA will be best served if a SER COO is immediately established in Atlanta, Georgia, pending the opening of the physical Southeast Regional Office. IIPJSJ further suggests that additional SER COOs should be located in Huntsville, Alabama and Nashville, Tennessee. Situated in these strategic locations, and implementing concrete IP awareness, education, and outreach initiatives, the SER COOs will expand the region's commonwealth of IP stakeholders, and thereby enhance the opportunities for innovation entrepreneurship and related socio-economic advancement, and otherwise achieve immediate and transformative impacts in multiple IP underserved communities throughout the Southeast region.

IIPJSJ's General Comments Regarding the Establishment of COOs in the Southeast Region

The United States is a global leader in intellectual property development and dissemination and sets the standard for the social function of IP endeavor in the total political economy. The American intellectual property ecosystem is highly robust and vital to our nation's economic growth and cultural progress, and exemplifies an IP regime envisioned to promote the advancement of culture and the stimulation of useful innovation,

Notwithstanding these salutary goals and principles, the American IP regime often fails to fulfill the social justice obligations and effects of IP protection, which are key to the ultimate efficacy of our IP regime. Systemic inequities relating to socio-economic class, geographic situs, gender, and race, as well as structural imperfections in the IP system buttressed by a philosophical indifference toward the social justice opportunities and responsibilities of IP protection, have at times stunted the social efficacy of our IP system.² Consequently many innovators, creators, and entrepreneurs, particularly in underserved geographic regions and marginalized communities, are wholly unfamiliar with intellectual property terms, laws, and administrative procedures. Indeed, many such persons view the IP system with trepidation and suspicion and consider it more as an obstacle to their inventive, artistic, and entrepreneurial aspirations, than as a system for fostering and rewarding their intellectual labors.³

² See e.g., Jessica Milli, Emma Williams-Baron, Meika Berlan, Jenny Xia, and Barbara Gault, *Equity in Innovation: Women Inventors and Patents*, C448-Equity-in-Innovation.pdf (iwpr.org); Matthew Bultman, *For Black Inventors, Road to Owning Patents Paved with Barriers*, Bloomberg Law: I.P. Law News, (July 14, 2020); Miriam Marcowitz-Bitton and Emily Michiko Morris, *The Distributive Effects of IP Registration*, 23 Stan. Tech. L. Rev. 306 (2020); W. Michael Schuster, R. Evan Davis, Kourtney Schley, and Julie Ravenscraft, *An Empirical Study of Patent Grant Rates as A Function of Race and Gender*, 57 Am. Bus. L. J. 281 (2020); Robert Brauneis & Dotan Oliar, *An Empirical Study of the Race, Ethnicity, Gender and Age of Copyright Registrants*, 86 GEO. WASH. L. REV. 46 (2018); Lateef Mtima, *Copyright Social Justice in Service of Art: Lessons from Andy Warhol Foundation for the Visual Arts, Inc. v. Goldsmith*, 38 Harvard Journal of Law & Technology 697 (2024).

³ Indeed, inventor and entrepreneur mistrust often extends to legal and other IP professionals. Accounts of the predatory exploitation of unsuspecting inventors and creators run the gamut. In addition to the familiar, sham "patent acquisition" companies which entice inexperienced inventors with baseless promises to obtain patents on their behalf, a recent client of the Howard Law School IP Clinic recounted how one law firm had previously offered to secure a "patent" to protect her fiction novel, for a fee of \$30,000.



As Congress has acknowledged in its enactment of the UAIA, where American innovative and artistic potential remains unfulfilled, the greatest loss is suffered by our nation as a whole. Systemic impediments to broad and variegated participation in IP enterprise sap the vitality of our IP ecosystem. Such deficiencies undermine the social function of intellectual property protection of *maximizing* IP participation and the beneficial qualitative and quantitative contributions essential to our technological development, cultural advancement, and economic growth.⁴

The Unique Function of the SER COOs

The concept of “intellectual property” can be intimidating for many people; indeed, many STEM experts, creative artists, and even some legal practitioners are unfamiliar with even the basic aspects of IP protection. Moreover, in some IP industries, traditions of exploitative business practices have deprived many innovators and creators of the public recognition and financial rewards derived from their intellectual achievements. Consequently, to the extent that some members of IP underserved communities are even aware of the IP system, they view it with mistrust.⁵

One of Congress’ goals in authorizing the creation of the COOs is to dispel such apprehensions toward the patent and trademark legal infrastructures and to reorient the system to promote more widespread, inclusive, and variegated participation. Through the Southeast COOs, the USPTO can partner with K-12 schools, community colleges and higher education institutions, professional organizations, and trusted community organizations and religious organizations to conduct grassroots IP awareness and education programs in local venues of social, civic, and communal congregation.⁶ Through these and related initiatives, the USPTO will bring the IP system to the community and thereby cultivate new cohorts of innovators and IP entrepreneurs from among low-income and rural populations, as well as other underserved groups such as veterans, the disabled, and elder Americans.⁷

Given the expansive and demographically diverse communities that comprise the Southeast Region, IIPSIJ believes that it will be necessary to establish multiple COOs in order to adequately serve the needs of the Southeast Region population. It is critical that the COOs actively collaborate with local, trusted community organizations and professional associations to host IP awareness and education events, jobs fairs, and other programs conducted by USPTO patent and trademark attorneys and examiners together with local IP practitioners and entrepreneurs. Enlisting the participation of speakers and presenters from the region will provide ready confirmation that these and other IP career paths are

⁴ See Schuster, Davis, et. al. at 311-14 (“[I]nvention [is] “an established driver of long-term economic growth.” That goal is undermined where significant portions of the population are disincentivized from pursuing careers in innovation or undertaking acts of invention....First, society loses would-be great inventors where large groups are disenfranchised from participating in invention. Second, the quality of invention diminishes in the face of largely homogeneous inventors....Bell et al. describe the misallocation of potentially talented inventors into other professions where their natural gifts are squandered. This concept--dubbed “Lost Einsteins”--relies on career-allocation mechanisms unrelated to intelligence or aptitude for invention....[and] deprives society of a *quantum* of new inventors, and...improved *quality* of invention....Diverse groups of inventors...explore a wider scope of solutions and are more likely to arrive at an efficient resolution relative to a homogenous group.”)

⁵ See e.g., *Black founder of Internet domain registry, Network Solutions, reminisces on racial barriers in tech sector*, <https://thegrio.com/2012/06/28/black-founders-of-internet-domain-registry-network-solutions-reminisce-on-racial-barriers-in-tech-sector/>; Gina Henderson, “*debacle.com*”, *Emerge*, p. 136, May, 2000.

⁷ Rita S. Heimes, *Lawyers and Innovation*, INTELLECTUAL PROPERTY, ENTREPRENEURSHIP AND SOCIAL JUSTICE at 119.

open to individuals who hail from the region. These programs should be hosted both at the COO locations and also at community outreach venues with which residents of the region are already familiar.

Wherever possible, the SER COOs should be located in proximity to pertinent government public service offices such as the Small Business Administration, to better enable clients to interconnect available supportive resources. Indeed, one core purpose of the COOs is to establish direct relationships with individuals and small businesses, particularly in communities with limited legal and entrepreneurship support resources. The COOs should collaborate with SBA offices and related government agencies to integrate foundational IP education with other business information and training.

As IIPSI has previously commented in connection with the establishment of other COOs, the Southeast COOs should be structured primarily as an in-person resource for patent and trademark information, education, and pro bono legal support. The COOs should emphasize one-on-one in-person and virtual consultation for pro-se patent and trademark applicants, including small businesses and startups; education and training services should focus on early-stage IP development, protection, and commercialization, complemented with introduction to the USPTO Patent Pro Bono Program.

COO physical office layout should project an informal "storefront/walk-in" atmosphere and be designed to accommodate small group education and training sessions and inter-agency "collaborative hub" conferencing, as well as individual client consultation. Wherever possible, conference and meeting space facilities should be designed or modified to accommodate routine combination of adjoining, smaller meeting spaces into larger meeting venues, suitable for scaling IP, STEM, and entrepreneurship education programs and events, co-sponsored by local inventor groups, IP law firms, professional associations, and academic institutions.

In addition to its physical location, each COO should also be peripatetic in its delivery of services to the community – COO personnel should routinely go out into the communities they serve, particularly in rural areas, and not wait for local residents and organizations to come to them. Along these same lines, the COOs should also offer online education and IP career training webinars and remote consultation options to target working graduates and professionals who possess STEM and other pertinent degrees and training, in order to accommodate the vocational schedules and family obligations of their clients. Many potential innovators and entrepreneurs in underserved communities lack the resources that would enable them to devote their full attention to IP development pursuits or to otherwise incorporate in-person IP education, advice, and support into their already demanding schedules.⁸ COOs should further prioritize mobile outreach, including periodic regional "IP Roadshows" hosted in collaboration with local professional and community organizations.

Finally, while many IP ecosystem analysts and commentators widely extol the role of independent inventors and start-ups in American innovation, more empirical data is needed to detail the informational, legal support, and related challenges faced by such innovators and entrepreneurs. Working through the COOs, the USPTO can partner with the SBA, professional associations, and community organizations to collect data regarding IP entrepreneurship and start-ups, including data

⁸ A number of IP law firms and private sector and non-profit organizations offer various no-cost programs of this kind, which prepare candidates for the patent and trademark examiner application process and other IP careers, which compliment similar initiatives by the USPTO. *See e.g.*, Finnegan IP University, <https://www.finnegan.com/en/Finnegan-IP-University.html>.



concerning the extent to which small and medium businesses, especially those in rural and other IP underserved communities, pursue IP protection and valuation. In addition, the COOs should collaborate in the research and compilation of a database of these and related programs, to coordinate a national, no-cost public IP education and training curriculum. Anecdotal information obtained from rural and minority solo IP practitioners and small law firms, which typically serve the IP needs of independent IP producers and users, should also prove extremely valuable in constructing initiatives to address these issues.

IIPJ’s Responses to Specific Questions Regarding the Location, Planning, Design, and Functions of COOs in the Southeast Region

IIPSJ believes that the USPTO can best achieve the UAIA objectives for the SER COOs by immediately establishing a COO in Atlanta, Georgia, pending the opening of the permanent Southeast Regional Office.⁹ Atlanta serves as the epicenter of the nation’s network of Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs), a key factor in the USPTO’s decision to locate the Southeast Regional Office in that city. In addition to their primary mission of redressing systemic inequities in opportunities for higher education, HBCUs enjoy a rich and in many ways unique tradition of community engagement and service, including collaboration with public service entities and community organizations which serve low-income, working class, and rural populations, as well as small businesses, veterans, and other IP underserved cohorts.

The pedagogical and social justice objectives of the Atlanta based HBCUs¹⁰ are broad and diverse. A representative list of these institutions and their relevant programs and initiatives include the following:

Morehouse College: a liberal arts college established in 1867 to educate African American men; with a current enrollment of 2,689 students, pertinent academic programs include:

- iSTEM: <https://morehouse.edu/academics/programs/istem-work/>
- STEM Enrich summer Academy: <https://morehouse.edu/academics/programs/summer-academy/stem-enrich-summer-academy/>
- Verizon Innovative Learning Stem Achievers: <https://morehouse.edu/academics/programs/summer-academy/verizon-innovative-learning-stem-achievers-boys-and-girls/>.¹¹

⁹ As envisioned in the America Invents Act, Congress’ goals in authorizing the creation of the USPTO regional offices include improving the connection between the USPTO and patent filers and other innovators, by increasing outreach activities to individual innovators, small businesses, veterans, students, low-income and rural populations, and other groups underrepresented in patent filings. In addition, the regional offices are further intended to benefit patent examiner and administrative patent judge retention, including patent examiners and administrative patent judges from economically, geographically, and demographically diverse backgrounds, and to otherwise improve the quality of the patent system. Pending the opening of the permanent Southeast Regional Office in Atlanta, the Atlanta-based COO would provide invaluable support toward achieving these objectives.

¹⁰ The list includes HBCUs located in the city of Atlanta and in the Atlanta area.

¹¹ The college’s academic program is comprised of four divisions, including the Division of Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics; degree programs include traditional STEM fields such as biology, chemistry, and physics, as well as degrees in Kinesiology, Software Engineering, and a Dual Degree Engineering Program. <https://morehouse.edu/academics/academic-divisions/science-technology-engineering-and-math/>.



Spelman College: founded in 1881, today a global leader in the education of women of African descent; with a current enrollment of 2,177 and more than fifty full time faculty in the college’s STEM departments, pertinent programs include:

- G-STEM: <https://www.spelman.edu/academics/research-programs/g-stem/overview>
- Center of Excellence for Minority Women in STEM: <https://www.spelman.edu/coe-mws>
- Women in STEM Summer Bridge Accelerator: <https://www.spelman.edu/academics/research-programs/wistem>.¹²

Savannah State University: established in 1890, the oldest public HBCU in Georgia and holds patents relating to harvesting organic material for space travel and for dementia treatments; with a current enrollment of more than 4,000 students, pertinent programs include:

- STEM 360: <https://www.savannahstate.edu/stem360/outreach/index.shtml>
- STEM Success Center: <https://www.savannahstate.edu/stem360/stem-success-center/index.shtml>
- Department of Marine and Environmental Science: <https://www.savannahstate.edu/cost/mar-env-science/index.shtml>.¹³

Clark Atlanta University: formed through the consolidation of Atlanta University and Clark College, the first American institutions to award higher education degrees to African Americans; with a current enrollment of almost 4,000 students, pertinent programs include:

- Clayton County Public Schools (CCPS) and Genesis Innovation Academy (GIA): <https://www.cau.edu/school-of-education/Increasing-the-African-American-STEM-Teacher-Workforce.html>
- Verizon Innovative Learning Initiative: STEM enrichment program: <https://www.verizon.com/about/news/stem-enrichment-program-clark-atlanta>
- Center for Innovation and Entrepreneurial Development: <https://www.cau.edu/cied/index.html>.¹⁴

Fort Valley State University: established in 1895 to provide “a bridge to prosperity for the first generations of free black men and women in America”; with a current enrollment of almost 3,800 students, pertinent programs include:

- NSF Scholarships in Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics (STEM) program: <https://www.fvsu.edu/news/fvsu-awarded-more-than-1-million-to-increase-stem-enrollment/>.¹⁵
- Department of Education Cooperative Developmental Energy Grant: <https://www.fvsu.edu/news/fvsu-receives-nearly-3-million-to-increase-the-number-of-minority-stem-graduates/>.¹⁶

Albany State University: founded in 1903, with a current enrollment of more than 4,415 students, pertinent programs include:

¹² The Summer Bridge Accelerator is a six-week summer program available for first year students pursuing degrees in math, dual degree engineering, computer science, physics, chemistry, biochemistry, environmental science, biology and economics.
¹³ Additional degree programs include Bachelor of Science degrees in Computer Science Technology, Computer Science Technology, and Civil Engineering Technology.
¹⁴ The university is the recipient of a National Science Foundation grant to enhance the preparation of its graduates for post baccalaureate study in STEM disciplines. https://www.nsf.gov/awardsearch/showAward?AWD_ID=0625362.
¹⁵ \$1 million grant to increase STEM degree enrollment, retention, and graduation rates.
¹⁶ \$3 million grant to increase the number of minority STEM graduates; STEM degree programs include: Agriculture Engineering Technology, Biology, Biotechnology, Chemistry, Computer Science, and Electronics Engineering Technology.



- National Science Foundation STEM Scholars Program: <https://www.asurams.edu/academic-affairs/college-of-arts-sciences/natural-sciences/chemistry-forensic-sci/stem-scholars-program.php>.¹⁷
- Virtual STEM Conference: https://www.asurams.edu/stem_conference_2021/.¹⁸

Paine College: liberal arts college established in 1882, with a current enrollment of almost 1,000 students; pertinent programs include:

- STEM Education Pipeline Project: <https://www.paine.edu/web/academics/schools/the-math-and-science-improvement-program>.¹⁹
- Minority Science and Engineering Improvement Program: <https://paine.edu/web/mycampus/math-science-program>.²⁰

In addition to its extensive network of HBCUs, Atlanta hosts several other leading private and public higher education research-intensive institutions which would also provide valuable support for the SER COO. For example, the Emory University School of Law houses a nationally recognized IP program which offers a broad range of doctrinal IP courses in patent, trademark, trade secret, and copyright law, as well as related courses such as Technological Innovation and IP, International Patent Law, and Internet Law. One of the law school’s most prominent IP education initiatives is its TI:GER Program (“Technological Innovation: Generating Economic Results”), which provides students with experiential and practical training pertinent to supporting innovation endeavor and IP entrepreneurship. The TI:GER Program was constructed to, among other things, “bring together graduate students in law, business, science and engineering to work on start-up projects to transform highly promising research into economically viable projects.”²¹

Finally, Atlanta is also the situs of various state and local government agencies and business and professional organizations that support intellectual property-intensive industries and enterprise, including the Georgia Intellectual Property Alliance²² and the Atlanta Bar Association.²³ In light of these and other pertinent resources, the immediate establishment of a COO in the city of Atlanta pending the opening of the permanent SERO will forge many important relationships that will be critical to the ultimate success of the SERO.

Additional SER COO Locations

As noted above, given the large geographic area and diverse demographic populations which comprise the Southeast Region, IIPSI believes that the USPTO will need to establish multiple COO locations to properly service the region. In addition to the temporary Atlanta COO, IIPSI recommends that permanent COOs be located in:

¹⁷ Provides 24 annual scholarships of \$10,000 in biology, chemistry, and forensic science over the six-year duration of the project.
¹⁸ STEM degrees programs include Biology, Chemistry, Forensic Science, Computer Science, and Mathematics.
¹⁹ Math and Science Improvement Program: Five week summer program for recent high school graduates and transfer students:
²⁰ This is a “pipeline” program for high school graduates seeking to pursue STEM Degrees.
²¹ <https://law.emory.edu/academics/experiential-and-practical-training/technological-innovation-tiger.html>.
²² <https://www.gaipalliance.org/>.
²³ https://atlantabar.org/?pg=EComm_IntellectualProperty.

Huntsville, Alabama: Located in the Appalachian region of northern Alabama, Huntsville is an ideal location through which to achieve the mandates of the COOs. The city is a key center for aerospace and defense innovation, and hosts Redstone Arsenal, Cummings Research Park (CRP), Jetplex Industrial Park, and NASA's Marshall Space Flight Center, as well as major companies such as Blue Origin and Boeing, which complement a focus on research-intensive innovation. The University of Alabama in Huntsville, a center for technology and engineering research, is also located in the city, as well as a number of biotechnology firms, including The HudsonAlpha Institute for Biotechnology and Cummings Research Park, which support research in diagnosing disease, immune responses to cancer, and agricultural technologies, all of which provide an excellent setting in which to promote public engagement in the innovation sector.

Nashville, Tennessee: While the city is best known for its historic contributions to the fields of Country and popular music, Nashville is also a growing center for healthcare and biotechnology innovation, hosting events such as the Southeast Venture Showcase. The area's largest industry is health care, and Nashville hosts more than 300 health care companies, including the Hospital Corporation of America which is the world's largest private operator of hospitals. Nashville has been touted as "Athens of the South" due its many colleges and universities, the largest of which is Vanderbilt University, considered one of the nation's leading research universities. Nashville is also home to more HBCU institutions than any other city except for Atlanta.

Conclusion

In adopting the UNIA, Congress acted to implement an IP social justice policy essential to enhancing the competitive quality of our IP system. Contributing to America's scientific, technological, and cultural advancement is both the privilege and the responsibility of every American, and widespread and diverse participation in IP enterprise is critical to our national interests. Through its enactment of the UAIA, including the legislative directive to establish the COOs, Congress has placed the aspirational principles of equitable access, inclusion, and empowerment at the center of America's intellectual property regime.²⁴ In establishing this next generation of COOs, the USPTO continues to implement the concrete social justice goals and directives of the UAIA by empowering the citizens of the Southeast Region to cultivate their IP talents to the benefit of their communities and to the entire nation.

Respectfully Submitted,
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²⁴ IIPSIJ has previously advocated that Congress should further build upon the directives of the UAIA by authorizing the appointment of a National Coordinator to "Promote American Innovative and Creative Enterprise". Such a "PAICE" coordinator could utilize empirical data in collaboration with various government agencies and the private and non-profit public sectors to construct and pursue a strategic plan for enhancing the public's participation in the IP ecosystem.