Security Research Legal Defense Fund Awards $20,000 Grant to Maltese Students Facing Legal Action for Ethical Hacking

Washington, DC – August 14, 2025 — The [Security Research Legal Defense Fund](#) (SRLDF), a 501(c)(3) nonprofit dedicated to protecting researchers conducting good-faith security work, today announced a $20,000 grant to help cover legal expenses for three University of Malta students arrested after responsibly disclosing serious vulnerabilities in a student scheduling app.

In October 2022, computer science undergraduates Michael Debono, Giorgio Grigolo, and Luke Bjorn Scerri, alongside lecturer Mark Joseph Vella, discovered multiple security flaws in a student scheduling app widely used in Malta. The group reported their findings to the app's developers so the developers could correct the vulnerabilities. Yet the group faced criminal charges under Malta's Computer Misuse Act, with potential prison time and fines.

Their discovery—performed transparently and with intent to improve public cybersecurity—served the public interest. "All we ever wanted was to help," said Grigolo.

The SRLDF supports individuals targeted by legal action due to their good-faith security research. "Our mission is to ensure that ethical researchers have access to counsel when facing charges for revealing vulnerabilities so they can be fixed," said Stacy O'Mara, SRLDF coordinator.

The Fund's grants are awarded under [criteria](#) emphasizing financial need, alignment with definitions of "good faith," and board approval. SRLDF does not provide legal representation directly, but funds independent legal counsel to defend researchers and challenge chilling prosecutions.

SRLDF's grant to the Maltese students helps ensure the students will receive legal representation in ongoing or future hearings related to their security vulnerability disclosure—particularly vital as the case moves through Malta's courts. The students recently received a presidential pardon, and are currently awaiting a final September 9th court date to officially file the pardon in the case.

"Ethical security research strengthens society's digital resilience," said Harley Geiger, SRLDF Board Member. "Criminalizing researchers doing the right thing imposes a dangerous chill on the discovery and responsible reporting of cybersecurity vulnerabilities that need to be fixed before hostile actors can exploit them," according to Jim Dempsey, SRLDF Board Member. SRLDF Chair Kurt Opsahl added, "We're proud to stand behind these students. Our grant ensures their voices are heard—not muzzled by legal pressure."

The SRLDF encourages policymakers and app developers to adopt clear channels for security researchers to disclose software vulnerabilities so they can be mitigated, as well as a legal safe harbor for responsible actors. For more information about the Security Research Legal Defense Fund, including how to donate or volunteer, please visit securityresearchlegaldefensefund.org.

About the Security Research Legal Defense Fund
Founded in 2023, SRLDF bolsters the social welfare of the global community by financially supporting security researchers facing legal threats due to good-faith vulnerability disclosure. The organization funds independent legal counsel, grounds its work in the public interest, and is overseen by a standalone Board of Directors. Learn more: https://www.securityresearchlegaldefensefund.org/