

Lean Legal Market Inspires Philadelphia Judicial Fellowship Program

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It's not often that a legal employer hopes its employees get work elsewhere ASAP. But that's the case with a Philadelphia Common Pleas Court judicial fellowship program being launched this spring.

"I hope we lose them," said Philadelphia Common Pleas Judge Lisa M. Rau, who organized the Philadelphia Common Pleas Court's judicial fellowship program, in which all six regional law schools are participating, to provide unpaid, but marketable, work experience for recent law school graduates.

The program is reflective of the lean legal market for young lawyers, Rau said.

Rau said that court leaders realized that a lot of talented law school graduates weren't getting hired at the same time that the judicial system was even more swamped than usual because of multiple vacancies on the 93-member bench. Vacancies are not being filled until the next judicial election because of a budget-motivated moratorium on judicial appointments.

So the First Judicial District — along with Drexel University's Earle Mack School of Law, Rutgers School of Law, Temple University's James E. Beasley Law School, University of Pennsylvania Law School, Villanova University School of Law and Widener University School of Law — started a program in which judicial fellows will work at least 20 hours a week in the civil, criminal, family and orphans divisions of the FJD.

"I would consider it a failure if we still had a bunch of fellows who had been working for free for a year," Rau said.

Thirty-five judges have agreed to host up to 45 fellows who have already graduated from the region's six law schools. The number of available fellowships was determined by the number of judges willing to host the unpaid fellows, Rau said. Ten fellows already have been selected, she said.

Each judge will decide which fellow to hire, while fellows also will have a role in selecting which judges they would like to intern with, Rau said.

The ultimate point of the program is to provide an opportunity for unemployed law school graduates to get marketable experience while they look for work, Rau said.

Drexel associate law professor Chapin Cimino, who is helping Rau with the program, said that the program is not just a skills program, but a program to improve the quality of life of recent graduates who entered a legal market "just not ready to absorb [graduates] in waves as it had in the past."

The court's flexibility in investing time in training graduates just to wish them well as soon as they get a paid job is a strength of the program, Cimino said.

The deadline to apply for the fellowship is April 15, but some judges have already selected their fellows after the program was first floated in January, Rau said. But the program is going to have openings on a rolling basis as fellows get paid employment and create fellow openings at the courthouse, Rau said.

Judges participating in the program are expected to give legal-related assignments to their judicial fellows that they would give their paid judicial clerks; to accommodate the scheduling needs of judicial fellows for interviews or other professional development opportunities; and to provide mentoring to the judicial fellows. Fellows are expected to treat the position as seriously as if they were a paid member of the judge's staff.

Cimino said that working for a judge is going to provide a great networking opportunity for graduates.

When she clerked for a judge, Cimino said she gained a lot of value in seeing different law firms' written products and seeing all the lawyers coming through a judge's chambers.

The program is going to involve programming for fellows to meet each other as well as networking opportunities with active members of the Philadelphia Bar Association, Cimino said.

Philadelphia Common Pleas Court Judge Mark I. Bernstein said the program is a "great opportunity for young lawyers to learn what goes on in the court," while the program helps out because the commerce program is always busy.

Philadelphia Common Pleas Judge M. Teresa Sarmina, who already has a fellow working for her, said that the program benefits a graduate who "despite excellent qualifications, given our economy, has not yet had the ability to secure employment. So it benefits them to continue to hone their legal skills and to get real-world experience and not get too dejected."

Having a fellow benefits her chambers, Sarmina said, because the workload of a homicide judge involves opinions in almost every case and "gobs and gobs of PCRA's."

"The work can get to be rather crushing," Sarmina said.