

Pro Bono Fellowships: Returning to Public Interest Practice

By Toni Hicks

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The prospect of returning to the workforce after a parenting sabbatical or other career break can be daunting. A pro bono fellowship can help bring lawyers back into public interest law after a time away.

The New England-based environmental nonprofit Conservation Law Foundation (CLF) (www.clf.org) is pioneering the concept of a part-time pro bono fellowship as an “onramp” into the nonprofit sector. The idea is to tap into a group of experienced high performers who want to return to their careers after a period of caring for children or managing other family obligations. Recognizing the unique challenges faced by so-called “relaunchers,” CLF’s Senior Fellows Program offers flexible, part-time opportunities to gain valuable pro bono experience and nonprofit contacts while contributing substantively to the organization’s goals and objectives.

The program appears to be the first of its kind in the nonprofit market. Its closest analog is the private sector OnRamp Fellowship Program (www.onrampfellowship.com), which matches returning lawyers with six- and twelve-month paid positions in large law firms and corporate legal departments.

Erica Kyzmir-McKeon left her job as a Legal Services lawyer when a busy litigation schedule proved difficult to manage while caring for her young daughter. At the time, Erica’s options appeared to be “all or nothing” — continue to work full-time or put her public interest career on hold. A few months later, however, she came across a listing for CLF’s Senior Fellows Program.

“What drew me to CLF was the flexible, part-time opportunity to continue doing nonprofit advocacy work while I take a slight pause in my career,” said Erica. “I am gaining new skills and am making a real difference. When I apply for my next public interest law job, I’ll have valuable new experience and an expanded network of contacts going for me.”

Thanks to her background in legal services and keen interest in environmental protection and local food, Erica quickly established herself as a key player in CLF’s Legal Food Hub, which provides pro bono legal assistance and education to farmers, food entrepreneurs, and related organizations in order to foster a sustainable, resilient, and just food system. She is managing the Hub’s case intakes and referrals in Rhode Island and recently co-authored A Farmer’s Guide to Employment Law in Rhode Island.

Erica is part of an impressive cohort of mid- and late-career professionals who donate their time and expertise as Senior Fellows during a transitional phase such as returning from a career break, switching from private sector to nonprofit work, or moving into retirement. Most make an initial year-long commitment of 10 to 20 hours per week, and many continue their involvement with CLF after the first year.

The Senior Fellows Program was launched in 2016 with an initial vision of engaging two to four retiring lawyers to work for CLF pro bono. The organization reached out to its members and Board community as well as the professional networks of its staff to get the word out about the new program. CLF’s outreach and the program’s visibility have been enhanced by partnering with the Access to Justice Fellows Program, a project of the Massachusetts Access to Justice Commission and the Lawyers Clearinghouse, which places retiring lawyers and judges with local nonprofits in need of assistance.

Within six months of launching the Senior Fellows Program, CLF was receiving numerous applications from highly accomplished individuals, and it became evident that the program had the potential to grow far beyond its initially envisioned scope. It now includes both mid-and late-career lawyers as well as professionals from other fields, including finance, urban planning, and marine biology. Today, twelve Senior Fellows work on ongoing projects, and several others are involved on a more intermittent basis. Since the program’s inception, Senior Fellows have donated more than 12,000 hours of their valuable time and expertise.

A part-time Program Director and a part-time Program Assistant collaborate with CLF’s leadership team to identify organizational needs, recruit and vet candidates, and match incoming volunteers with appropriate assignments. They are responsible for onboarding Senior Fellows, helping to integrate them into the organization, facilitating productive working relationships with CLF staff, and documenting the amount and impact of volunteers’ contributions. The program more than pays for itself, generating pro bono services valued at 20 to 25 times the annual cost of its lean operation.

A consultant’s review of the program’s first year yielded valuable feedback about the Senior Fellows’ experiences. One described the program as unique, saying, “I couldn’t find anything like it anywhere else.” As a group, they highlighted the opportunity to leverage their skills and make a real difference on CLF projects, and to work with CLF’s highly talented team of attorneys, as well as one another. Importantly, they expressed satisfaction with their time commitment and the flexibility to work from home, and with feeling valued and appreciated for their contributions.

As the program matures, CLF remains committed to putting Senior Fellows to their highest and best use and tailoring the experience to the volunteers’ interests, expertise, and professional goals, as well as the organization’s priorities. As a mid-career relauncher myself, I am particularly pleased about piloting this model for bringing returning lawyers into (or back into) public interest law.