

FRANCES MAG

Ahead Hunting

For Law Grads, the Pipeline to Labor

By Suzy Bohnert, Office of Public Affairs, Washington, D.C.

If there is a common ingredient for the lawyers in the Honors Program in the Office of the Solicitor, it's motion, motion, motion.

The Honors Program is designed to expose outstanding law school graduates to the broad range of work SOL performs — and that means rotations and assignments to introduce these lawyers to the department's programs and operations. Twelve attorneys are currently enrolled, and upon successfully completing the two-year program, they will find a home within the Solicitor's office to start their careers.

The program helps keep talent in the Department of Labor pipeline by encouraging these lawyers to continue their careers in public service and by maintaining a constant flow of up-and-coming attorneys.



National Office Participants: 1st Row, L-R: Sara Johnson, Steven Gardiner, Benjamin Botts, Ashkea McAllister; 2nd Row, L-R: Nancy Steffan, Sarah Marcus, Alek Felstiner, Heather Filemyr, Candyce Phoenix

First-year participants in the current program are Alek Felstiner, Steven Gardiner, Ashkea McAllister and Nancy Steffan, all in the national office; Pilar Castillo, Philadelphia; Celeste Moran, Boston; and Monica Moukalif, Atlanta. Second-year participants are Benjamin Botts, Heather Filemyr, Sara Johnson, Sarah Marcus and Candyce Phoenix, all in the national office.

The job rotations, as Sara Johnson noted, allow new lawyers like her to “learn about different statutory regimes and about legal work of the Solicitor's office: trial litigation, appellate litigation, regulatory work and client advice.”

Benjamin Botts, has participated in a number of assignments. Now on detail to the Occupational Safety and Health Division of SOL, he has worked for the Fair Labor Standards Division and the Plan Benefits Security Division.

A benefit of this frequent movement, Sarah Marcus said, is simply the variety

May 2012

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Dear Frances

of assignments. “This has given me the opportunity not just to learn about the range of work that happens at the department, but also to figure out what type of work is the best fit for me.”

Heather Filemyr shares this sentiment. “It’s a great opportunity to learn about the work done by many divisions in the Solicitor’s office and a broader perspective on DOL’s work than might be possible if assigned directly into a single division.”

After nine months in the program, Ashkea McAllister has completed a number of projects, “including drafting legal analyses for cases under the Federal Railroad Safety Act, the Mine Safety and Health Act, the Service Contract Act, and a variety of other statutes.”



Celeste Moran

Working in Boston, Celeste Moran has had a similar experience. “I have the privilege of working with a number of client agencies to protect the rights of America’s workforce, and to work on a variety of cases to keep employees safe, to protect their pension benefits, and to make sure they are paid properly,” she said.



Pilar Castillo

Pilar Castillo, a trial attorney in Philadelphia handling a variety of cases from all DOL agencies in that region, has “analyzed files, engaged in negotiations and depositions, provided pre-citation referral assistance to various clients, gone to trials and hearings, and prepared briefs.”

The program places new attorneys in multiple practice areas in a relatively short time, as Steven Gardiner discovered. “For example, I have drafted legal briefs for both administrative and federal appellate courts in cases involving employee whistle-blowers, workplace safety and discrimination complaints. Another major component of my work is responding to questions from client agencies and conducting discrete legal research

projects addressing questions arising within SOL. This will often involve assessing the legal landscape on a particular issue, or determining how a recent court decision impacts current DOL positions. Other assignments are more enforcement-related.”

For Monica Moukalif, the program has provided “the unique opportunity to be responsible for my own caseload and gain a great deal of direct, hands-on experience in litigation very early in my career as an attorney. The added bonus, of course, is that I am getting this experience while advocating for workers.”

In terms of developing as an advocate, there’s no substitute for jumping headfirst into challenging work,” Alek Felstiner said.

Added Nancy Steffan, “It is hard to imagine another entry-level legal job that would provide a new attorney with the variety of legal work experience that we get in such a short period of time.”



Monica Moukalif

Additional benefits, according to some participants, are that the attorneys in

the Solicitor's office are great mentors and colleagues, dedicating their time to train Honors attorneys and treat them as full-fledged members of the team.

"The divisions really invest a lot in making sure that we have great experiences and learn as much as possible about their work. We try to add value by bringing a fresh pair of eyes, an extra set of hands and the cross-disciplinary viewpoint that comes from working with so many different divisions and clients. Many attorneys have thanked me for pitching in with their cases, but I truly cannot repay them for the invaluable experience, the insightful guidance, and the friendships I've formed along the way," said Candyce Phoenix.

From these and earlier experiences, they have learned more about public service. Heather Filemyr, the daughter of a former economist at the Bureau of Labor Statistics, said, "During law school, I completed two internships at DOL — one in the Division of Plan Benefits Security and one in the New York Regional Office. I was also a summer law clerk at the Federal Trade Commission." Through those experiences, she gained a good, global sense of the department's work and that of other agencies.

Because they all come from different backgrounds, they had many reasons for going into the legal profession and for entering the Honors Program. As Benjamin Botts said, "I got interested in doing workers' rights between college and law school when I worked as a paralegal for a small immigration law firm. I constantly heard stories from low-income clients whose employers failed to pay them the wages they'd earned, or discriminated against them because of their immigration status. My first year in law school, I volunteered with a workers' rights clinic, where I helped the same community of clients address their employment issues, and I knew I'd found my calling."

Now that they've been at Labor long enough to get their feet wet, what has surprised these attorneys most, Sarah Marcus said, is "how many statutes DOL enforces and administers.

As part of the Honors Program, the department invests a significant amount of time in selecting and training attorneys. In the national office, Honors Program attorneys spend the first nine months of the program receiving developmental assignments and training before beginning a series of 90-day detail assignments to various SOL divisions in the national office. National office Honors Program attorneys may also volunteer to work on a detail assignment in a regional office.

SOL hires Honors Program attorneys into its regional offices, too. The focus of the regional Honors Program is developing an attorney's skills as a trial litigator under all the statutes commonly enforced by DOL. Receiving guidance from experienced courtroom lawyers, an Honors Program attorney will typically carry a varied caseload from beginning to end: analyzing an investigative file, filing a complaint, engaging in negotiations and discovery, preparing briefs and arguing motions, and if a case does not settle, bringing it to trial.

Honors Program attorneys located in regional offices also will receive select assignments from the national office divisions to complement their trial work or to expose them to practice areas usually handled by the national office. Funding permitting, these attorneys will travel to the national office to participate with headquarters colleagues in training and networking opportunities. Regional office Honors Program attorneys may also volunteer to work on a detail assignment in the national office.

The department currently plans to hire a number of attorneys to begin the Honors Program in fall 2013. Applicants must graduate in spring/summer 2013, be a graduate law student completing study by summer 2013, or complete a judicial clerkship prior to September 2013. Selection is highly competitive, and candidates will be considered based on academic achievement, writing skills, law review and/or moot court experience, clinic or extracurricular activities, as well as demonstrated interest in government service or public-interest law.

SOL is committed to diversity and encourages all qualified individuals to apply by submitting by mail, e-mail, or fax, a resume, a cover letter stating a geographic preference, a writing sample, and a law-school transcript to the address below. The application deadline is Oct. 12, 2012.

Please send paperwork to Director, The Honors Attorney Program, U.S. Department of Labor, Office of the Solicitor, Room N-2700, 200 Constitution Ave., N.W., Washington, D.C. 20210, fax: (202) 693-5774, email: SOLHonorsProgramApplications@dol.gov.