



Legal Service Organizations Meet the Legal Apprenticeship Movement

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And please see our blog on legal apprenticeships – www.LikeLincoln.org

Throughout the U.S., legal services organizations are struggling to raise funds and meet demand for client services. Meanwhile, aspiring lawyers are discouraged — by the rising cost of law school and poor job market – from pursuing their dreams. Sometimes, two problems can conspire with each other to find a solution. **Legal service organizations and aspiring lawyers, you two really should meet.**

In a handful of states, apprenticing in a law office is a recognized pathway to becoming a lawyer without going to law school. In California, the Law Office Study Program requires that an aspiring lawyer study in the office of a lawyer or judge for 18 hours per week for four years.

At the Sustainable Economies Law Center (SEL C), we are predicting that the number of people who become lawyers via the apprenticeship route will grow exponentially in coming years. All non-lawyer staff members at SEL C are en route to becoming lawyers via apprenticeships, and we are documenting this process on our blog at LikeLincoln.org.

Legal service organizations can simultaneously facilitate the legal apprenticeship movement and benefit greatly from it. Here is a list of 10 ways that legal service organizations will benefit from hosting apprentices.

1. **Tripling the supply of legal aid attorneys and serving more low-income clients:** The supply of lawyers in the U.S. is currently not meeting demand for legal services. There is “only one legal aid attorney available for every 6,415 low-income people.” If every legal aid attorney hosts two apprentices, the supply of lawyers competent to serve low income communities would soon triple.
2. **Lawyers without law school debt are in a better position to serve low income clients in the long term:** Today, most lawyers begin their careers with nearly \$100,000 in school debt, which makes it difficult to commit to annual salaries of \$42,000, the average entry-level salary for a legal aid attorney. However, those who become lawyers via apprenticeships may even earn and save money while en route to becoming a lawyer, which makes it easier to commit to a humble to moderate income in the long term.
3. **Diversifying organizational staffing:** Approximately 88% of lawyers in the U.S. are White and 70% of lawyers are men, which hardly represents the demographics of clients served by most legal service organizations. Apprenticeships will enable a much more diverse group of people to become lawyers. Low income individuals will not be blocked from become attorneys by the high cost of law school. People will be able to become lawyers even if they do not have the resources and privilege to put their lives on hold, move to a new city, and attend law school for three years.
4. **Training attorneys in the communities where they live and plan to work:** Many people leave their communities to attend law schools in affluent urban centers, and often do not return to their communities after law school. Rather than attempting to recruit recent law graduates from urban centers, legal service organizations can train attorneys in the same communities where the attorney will eventually work.



5. **Creating opportunities for non-lawyer staff, building staff skills, and improving staff retention:** Current paralegals and other non-lawyer staff members of legal organizations are perhaps in the best positions to begin apprenticeships. Many learn a great deal about the law through their daily work, and the learning process can become more active and intentional when a staff member commits to the apprenticeship route. Staff members who apprentice may also have a greater incentive to keep their jobs with the organization in the long term, as they will recognize the potential for perpetual learning and growth.
6. **Diversifying skills within the organization:** Apprentices may bring new skills and/or cultural and linguistic competencies to legal organizations. Particularly since apprentices may be older and have more career experience than the average law student, apprentices may bring other helpful skills, such as writing, community organizing, social work, and computer skills.
7. **Improving teaching and counseling skills of supervising attorneys:** Teaching the law to apprentices will improve an attorney's skills in explaining complex legal topics, which will improve client counseling skills and an attorney's own understanding of the law. In addition, apprentices will be able to closely observe the work of the attorney, and the attorney will likely grow and mature in response to feedback and input offered by apprentices.
8. **Supervising attorneys will revisit basic law topics with eyes of seasoned practitioners:** Assisting an apprentice with the study of bar exam topics and other legal areas will help an attorney to revisit legal questions and topics that the attorney may have forgotten or begun to take for granted. As an added benefit, the attorney will revisit the material with the eyes of an experienced practitioner, which gives new context to the material.
9. **Creating a culture of learning at the organization and participating in the discourse on improving legal education:** An organization that takes on apprentices will quickly infuse a culture of learning throughout the organization. Every client case becomes a learning opportunity for apprentices within the organization. The learning opportunities and materials developed by the organization could contribute significantly to the growing discourse on ways to diversify techniques of legal education. For example, the ABA Task Force on the Future of Legal Education and groups making similar inquiries will learn a great deal from the experiences of apprentices and their supervising attorneys.
10. **It's a bit like having a summer law clerk that stays for four years:** Most legal nonprofits host student law clerks during the summer and during semesters. However, the very short-term nature of such internships can add to the burden of the organization, requiring attorneys to pour many resources into training students, the majority of whom do not return to practice in such areas of law after law school. The long-term nature of an apprenticeship will enable deeper learning and will enable the apprentice to make significant contributions to the organization and its clients during the term of the apprenticeship.