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Unemployed Lawyers Make A Difference

Unemployed Lawyers Make a Difference

Compiled by Abigail Rome
December 11, 2009

For unemployed lawyers during the recession, finding work can be difficult, even in local government. At the same time, many state governments lack funds to hire much-needed professionals, such as lawyers. The New Jersey Division of Law has come up with a creative way to bridge the gap between lawyers looking for work and an overload of unattended legal cases. And, it's produced a welcome byproduct: a reduction of state debt.

[National Public Radio](#) reports that the New Jersey was facing a challenge. It had a deficit of 150 lawyers out a staff of attorneys that once numbered 612, and its finances were in such bad shape that it couldn't hire legal help. So, State Attorney General Anne Milgram decided to recruit unemployed lawyers and recent law school graduates to do volunteer legal work.

Since the program started in July, it has placed more than 60 lawyers, many of whom have yet to find their first permanent jobs after law school. They commit to working 20 hours per week for 3 months, and take on varying jobs, including conducting research, taking depositions and sometimes appearing in court.

In an article in the [New Jersey Star Ledger](#), Ms. Milgram says, "This is a great opportunity for qualified candidates to learn how state government works, to gain experience in areas of the law that may be unfamiliar to them, and to make a genuine difference by working on legal matters that impact on New Jersey citizens." One of the impacts realized is that they've helped the debt recovery unit bring in \$20 million of needed cash. That's quite a bonanza for the State.

While these lawyers can feel good about making a difference, some career counseling professionals are examining whether it's worth it for college graduates to spend large sums of money for an advanced degree. In an article in [Smart Money](#) Kathy Sims, Director of the [University of California, Los Angeles](#) Career Center, says that prospective students should be careful about investing in further education because the long-term impact of the recession on particular fields isn't yet clear.

Law can be one of those fields. On the one hand, the [Bureau of Labor Statistics](#) predicts that employment for lawyers will grow about 11% between 2006 and 2016. However, Marcia Harris, a career counselor and the former director of the University of North Carolina's Career Services, says that while many students assume that going to law school will open up doors, "there are many, many unemployed lawyers out there."

For those who want to effect justice and have a positive effect on society, volunteer or pro bono work may be just the answer. A new book, published and reported by the [University of Buffalo \(UB\)](#), finds that pro bono work is insufficient to address the many social and legal problems faced by the poor. Robert Granfield, one of the book's editors, as well as professor and chair of the [University at Buffalo](#) Department of Sociology, says, "The amount of pro bono legal work is up substantially in the U.S., especially in large law firms across the country. It has increased 10% since 2004, with 73% of lawyers polled by the American Bar Association (ABA) saying they provide some pro bono work."

A second editor, Lynn Mather, professor of law and political science at UB, adds that, "pro bono activity is unevenly distributed throughout the profession. Only 27% of the attorneys in an American Bar Association survey provided the 50 hours of legal services encouraged by the association." She notes, however, that due to the recession, some firms have increased the number of pro bono hours they provide in order to keep their young associates occupied.

Law firms aren't the only ones doing taking advantage of the largess and talents of underemployed attorneys. New Jersey has followed suit, and to its benefit.