

## OnRamp Program Aims to Bring Women Back to Big Law

Caren Ulrich Stacy, Lawyer Development Strategies

SAN FRANCISCO — Caren Ulrich Stacy has devoted her professional life to counseling law firms on recruiting, training and diversity. Now the Denver-based consultant has enlisted Cooley, Baker Botts, Sidley Austin and Hogan Lovells to help jump-start the careers of female attorneys who have taken time off from work for one reason or another. [The OnRamp Fellowship](#), a one year, paid training program began accepting applications [earlier this month](#). It is open to women lawyers with three or more years of experience who have taken a hiatus from practicing law of at least two years. The four Am Law 100 firms participating in the pilot program are considering applicants in Palo Alto, Los Angeles, San Diego and San Francisco, in addition to 11 other U.S. cities. The Recorder checked in with Ulrich Stacy by email this week to ask about the program's goals and who's applying.



**Q:** What was the inspiration for this program?

**A:** The design of the Fellowship was based on Legal Residency Programs, which are short-term internships for recent law graduates. Having helped several law schools and law firms build residency programs, I saw firsthand the incredible benefits of a job "try-out" for both the law firm and the new lawyer: The law firm gets an opportunity to assess the new lawyer who they see as a "risky" hire since he (or she) didn't get a job through the traditional on-campus interview process. And the new lawyer gains valuable experience that he (or she) can leverage going forward.

Women lawyers who took time off to raise children or for other reasons are often seen as risky hires as well. Because of the gap in their experience, there is a question about their fit in the traditional lockstep scheme, and whether or not they have the skills and the desire to successfully re-enter the profession. I created the OnRamp Fellowship, which is essentially a residency program or job "try-out" for experienced women lawyers, as a way to lessen the risk for employers while giving returning women an opportunity to broaden their experience and demonstrate their value.

**Q:** How did you convince law firms to participate?

**A:** I approached specific law firms—Cooley, Sidley, Baker Botts and Hogan Lovells—that are incredibly well-respected for their diversity efforts and successes. They didn't need convincing, actually. Immediately realizing that this program is an attempt to help women re-entering the workforce while also improving the profession through increased gender diversity, they all joined the effort without hesitation.

**Q:** What's the benefit for the participating firms?

**A:** The participating law firms gain access to a very talented pool of women lawyers who want to return, but need an opportunity to demonstrate their value. There is little risk to the firm, and a huge upside in potentially increasing gender diversity in the firm and in the profession as a whole.

**Q:** I understand that you'll be accepting applications until early March, but can you describe the applicant pool thus far?

**A:** A little over two weeks into the launch, more than 30 women lawyers have started the application process. Their backgrounds and experiences differ drastically. Many of them took a hiatus of three to 15 years, which is a larger range than I initially expected. A few of the women, interestingly, are military wives who left the profession to follow their significant others' careers. No matter their story, however, they all seem to share a strong desire to return to practice and demonstrate their value to clients.

**Q:** What do you consider when matching applicants to the law firms?

**A:** The matching process includes a personality, skills, values and writing assessment. The goal is to ensure that the applicants have all of the necessary characteristics—initiative, engagement, passion, decision making, problem solving, oral and written advocacy, confidence—to thrive in a law firm. And, to be certain that the values of the applicants are aligned with the values of the firm, the participating law firms are undergoing a culture analysis. Often, cultural compatibility matters as much or more than anything else when examining the reasons for attrition in law firms.

**Q:** What are your goals for this pilot program?

**A:** The main goal is to increase gender diversity in law firms. To do so, first, we have to bring great women lawyers back into the profession. And, second, we have to equip these women lawyers—along with all of our associates and partners—with the tools and experience needed to advance and thrive in leadership roles. The longer term hope is that the Fellowship platform will increase these returning women's skills and experience so they can gain full-fledged, longer-term positions with law firms and eventually advance into leadership roles.

Contact the reporter at [npierrepoint@alm.com](mailto:npierrepoint@alm.com).