



Homeless people gather underneath Interstate 10 where over 100 homeless people sleep each night December 16, 2007 in New Orleans, Louisiana. Affordable housing stocks have dwindled with rents rising 45 percent and homelessness has more than doubled to almost 12,000 individuals in New Orleans following Hurricane Katrina. (Photo by Mario Tama/Getty Images)

Associates: I'll Take a Year of Pro Bono, Please

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Jennifer Eldridge, a first year associate in DLA Piper's Chicago office, has big aspirations for the next 12 months: She hopes to assist domestic violence victims, file asylum paperwork for refugees, and help some past offenders clear their juvenile criminal records.

It's a bit different than the standard associate workload because Eldridge is one of two recipients of DLA Piper's Krantz Fellowship, which gives her an entire year to only work on pro bono projects.

"I'm really looking to get some litigation experience," said Olga Slobodyanyuk, the other recipient of the fellowship. "You get to run your own discovery, potentially go to trial, talk to opposing counsel, have your own practice going. That's a great experience."

With around 4,000 lawyers and 90 offices around the world, DLA Piper is taking advantage of its vast resources and allowing two associates to spend a year working on pro bono projects. There's no contract that requires the associates to stay at the firm at the end of the year, but DLA Piper believes the investment will help groom the associates and claims it's the only firm offering associates a full year of pro bono work at the same salary. Overall, it placed 28th on The American Lawyer's 2016 national pro bono ranking, with its lawyers clocking an average of 73.3 hours per week — the firm has said the average for associates is actually higher.

It's not alone in its pro bono efforts: other firms including Arnold & Porter, Paul Hastings and Simpson Thacher & Bartlett, offer programs that allow summer associates to split their time between firm and public interest. Hogan Lovells offers first-year associate four-month pro bono rotations, and Skadden, Arps, Slate, Meagher & Flom offers externships with the Legal Aid Society's Community Law Office and Lawyers Alliance for New York.

DLA Piper founded its fellowship in 2011, which it named after retired DLA Piper partner Sheldon Krantz, a former director of New Perimeter, a nonprofit firm affiliate that develops pro bono projects in under-served regions around the world.

At DLA Piper, Eldridge and fellow first-year Slobodyanyuk were picked as this year's only fellows following their summer associateship at the firm. All DLA Piper summer associates were given the chance to apply after receiving their full-time offers from the firm.

"Talking to my friends ... they can't fathom that we get to do this," said Eldridge, who hopes to enter the firm's real estate practice in her second year.

This year, the native Chicagoan, who earned her JD from the University of Illinois College of Law, said she'll focus on juvenile justice, domestic violence and immigration work.

Slobodyanyuk, who earned a JD at Harvard Law School, will focus on housing issues, and unlawful detainer work. She will also work with New Perimeter on its global pro bono projects.

Both women said they applied to the fellowship not only to do good work, but to expand their networks within DLA Piper. Each pro bono case can put them on the radar screens of partners who might assign them work as an associate.

"It's something I talk to young associates about all the time," said Anna Helms, director and counsel of the firm's U.S. pro bono program. "On so many levels. It's the ability to be in charge of a case and manage how things run, it's building your network. I can't tell you how many people have told me, 'Oh I worked with a partner on a pro bono case and now I get billable work from them.'"

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