


# LawyerCorps Connecticut Prepares to Launch Public Service Careers

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Judge William Bright

*Gary Lewis*

Four months after joining the Connecticut Supreme Court in 2007, Chief Justice Chase Rogers noticed a disturbing trend: The foreclosure docket had grown to 20,000 cases, up from 15,000 the year before.

To her, it was the proverbial canary in the coal mine that recession was on the horizon. In a proactive step, she helped develop and implement the country's first mandatory mediation program.

Recently, the perceptive judge spotted another trend: More and more, people were coming to court without lawyers. As such, Rogers addressed a forum of top officials of the Legal Services Corporation, state supreme court judges, academics

and prominent "deans" of the national bar at the White House last April. Her presentation was focused on the growing need for pro bono aid.

Fast forward and Connecticut is now ground zero for a "transformative" initiative that, when launched, will partner three young attorneys with the state's legal aid organizations and surround them with infrastructure and mentors. The goal is to provide legal services to those who need them most.

The hope is LawyerCorps Connecticut, which has a motto of "Fight Poverty, End Injustice," will serve as a launch pad for some of the state's up-and-coming young attorneys.

"When something is the prototype, you have to figure out how to do it, how to structure it," said Connecticut Superior Court Judge William Bright.

As chair of the Judicial Branch's pro bono committee and a member of the Access to Justice Commission, Bright was intrigued when he first heard Rogers' LawyerCorps pitch in 2013.

The program, modeled after Teach for America, which sends college graduates into underserved urban schools, is an initiation for young attorneys about the importance of public service, said Sandy Broadus, executive director and chief counsel for LawyerCorps Connecticut.

Broadus' appreciation for public service was nurtured by a fellowship program at Georgetown University Law Center, where she served as a public defender for two years. Today, she continues "carrying the banner" of public service, which is part of the reason she was tapped to help turn a burgeoning little-known upstart into a household name.

"I know what a springboard" public service is, she said. "It was something that shaped my career."

Before LawyerCorps Connecticut can shape any futures, a budget must be ironed out: Three fellows must be hired and their salaries, expected to start at \$50,000, must be set depending on funding, officials said.

For now, exact figures of the program's first-year budget are still being calculated; initial estimates were that it could be implemented for fewer than \$1.1 million a year. As of July, LawyerCorps Connecticut received \$194,000 in donations. Its biggest backers, United Technologies and General Electric, have pledged a combined \$300,000 over the next three years, much of it used to fund fellows who will be housed at Connecticut's three legal aid organizations—Connecticut Legal Services, Greater Hartford Legal Aid and New Haven Legal Assistance.

"I'm privileged to see we have gelled and coalesced around this single focus," Broadus said.

LawyerCorps Connecticut was supposed to begin accepting applications for fellows in March, with a target start date sometime in July. Broadus classified the delay as a minor hitch. She is "optimistic" the program will still launch this year.

The advisory board continues jumping through organizational hula hoops that come along with establishing a model some program leaders say will set the national groundwork for programs in the future.

"It has the potential to be revolutionary," said Brackett Denniston III, senior vice president and general counsel for General Electric. Denniston, one of the senior attorney fellows, will look to mentorship as part of GE's involvement.

He called the initiative a "magnificent idea" and lamented the fact there wasn't such a program in place when he was coming up the lawyerly ranks. He said he would have benefitted back then, although it's not too late.

"The underappreciated side of a mentorship is that it's a two-way street," Denniston said. "I will have my own reverse mentorship. It will help keep [me] fresh and contemporary, which is important to a senior lawyer."

Broadus' view is that it's better to make sure the program is done correctly rather than expeditiously.

"There's no playbook, no template," she said. "Everything was

aspirational."

Even though Connecticut is one of the wealthiest states in the nation—the median household income is nearly \$70,000 with about one in nine people earning more than \$200,000 a year—around 200,000 people have unmet needs for legal aid, said Steve Eppler-Epstein, executive director of Connecticut Legal Services. Of the more than 11,600 cases statewide last year, Connecticut legal aid groups can only serve a fraction.

Legal aid services are down about 15 percent, Eppler-Epstein said, pointing to federal and state budget cuts as the main culprits. That means legal aid organizations must implement a system that prioritizes the most serious cases.

"We have to do a form of triage because we don't have enough resources," Eppler-Epstein said. "There are people who are dealing with family violence. There are elderly people and people with mental health issues who are sometimes being warehoused. Without help, the situation may be heartbreaking. With help, it's often a heartwarming result."

Budget cuts have forced Connecticut Legal Services to reduce staff, from more than 80 employees, including 56 in-house attorneys in 2008, to 72 employees and 48 attorneys.

While Eppler-Epstein said that doesn't sound like a significant reduction, each of its attorneys handle hundreds of cases a year.

Growing need for services mean most are left with little choice but to go pro se in court proceedings. These days, 80 percent of family cases have at least one pro se party. The number is much higher in landlord-tenant disputes. In civil cases, it's about 28 percent.

Bright said people were suddenly in need of legal services when the economy went into a tailspin.

The result of the 2008 recession was devastating for interest on lawyers' trust account, or IOLTA, which primarily funds legal aid. Before the recession hit in 2008, IOLTA funds were at \$20.7 million. Five years later, they were down nearly 90

percent, to \$2.2 million.

"There was a perfect storm of less funding and more people needing aid," said Jamey Bell, executive director Greater Hartford Legal Aid.

Often, she said legal aid services aren't high on a checklist of basic needs.

"It's not something like hunger or homelessness, where the impact is clear," she said. "It's harder to see. You have to think about it more to see why it's important to have a legal aid lawyer."

To cushion the blow of the IOLTA loss, Rogers backed a legislative increase in court fees, which brought in \$9 million in new revenue for legal aid. In addition, legal aid receives an additional \$13 million to \$14 million in funding from the Connecticut Bar Foundation. All this is being done to avoid putting people in a position to represent themselves.

Bright said there are unintended consequences with the pro se route. Together, they threaten to erode public trust in the judicial system. Bright said the way the system is set up—with attorneys representing each side and a judge umpiring the matter—is already "adversarial."

So when "one side or both sides do not know the rules of evidence of civil procedure ... it bogs the system down for everybody," he said. "You can have litigants leave feeling unsatisfied with the process itself because they didn't understand the process."

Rogers' recent endeavor was motivated by a need to lessen what is commonly referred to as the "justice gap." She shared her idea of LawyerCorps with Bright for the first time in 2013.

Subsequently, the pair went on a circuit of the state's largest firms, corporations, bar associations and law schools looking for support.

The idea of marrying legal aid with corporate funding is new, Bright said, but makes sense with the growth of corporations' in-house legal departments that have "become more publicly

conscientious."

Broadus said finding sponsorship in a state with fixed dollars is tricky. LawyerCorps Connecticut is supposed to supplement the state's three legal aid organizations, not siphon funding away from it, so Broadus said program leaders have worked diligently to ensure there is no "cannibalization of support."

"This is an additive program," she said. "We don't want to see a diversion of funds redirected to LawyerCorp."

The program is symbiotic, a natural pairing of clients in need of legal aid with green attorneys grappling for employment in a market that has become increasingly competitive.

So far, Rogers likes the way the program has come together, and she expressed gratitude for all the partners who have helped get LawyerCorps Connecticut so far.

"One of my top concerns has been providing meaningful access to justice for all of Connecticut's residents, including those who are economically disadvantaged," she said in an emailed statement to the Law Tribune.

To whatever heights the program soars, Broadus said, it's important to remember the program's humble beginnings. It started with Rogers' vision, commitment and unwillingness to quit regardless of early setbacks. "She has been a tireless advocate," Broadus said.

Bell said she hopes the program grows into a self-sustaining brand, with the "inaugural class of fellows" touting merits to future applicants.

"It is a new idea, and it helps when you can see more details of how it's going to operate on the ground than just having a concept," she said. "People need to see what it's going to be. After that, any questions about it will be laid to rest."

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