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State Bar & Bar Associations

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Hellen Hong hopes her experience can bring meaningful changes to support California's needy

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Legal aid organizations across the state are struggling to attract and retain attorneys because the salaries they offer cannot match those available at law firms or governmental entities.

This problem has worsened as new lawyers, including those with a passion for public interest work, increasingly enter the job market with upwards of \$100,000 in educational debt.

The challenges confronting legal services groups seeking to staff their offices and the difficulties faced

by those trying to make a career as a legal aid attorney work out financially are familiar to Hellen Y. Hong, director of the State Bar's Office of Access and Inclusion.

Hong attended Loyola Law School with a desire to become a public interest attorney. Even though she worked full time all but her final semester, she graduated in 2004 roughly \$110,000 in debt from her graduate and undergraduate studies.

However, her debt load did not dissuade her from legal services work. In her first legal aid job at the Los Angeles Center for Law and Justice, she made less than \$40,000 before passing the bar and roughly \$44,000 after she was licensed. She represented indigent clients in consumer fraud cases, unlawful detainer trials and unauthorized practice of law matters.

Hong, whose family immigrated to the U.S. from South Korea when she was young, often got the chance to represent other immigrants.

After nearly two years at the center, Hong took a job as a lawyer at Neighborhood Legal Services in Los Angeles County because of the opportunity to handle impact litigation and learn from experienced litigators.

She represented clients in consumer and housing disputes, including serving as counsel on a multi-plaintiff action against what was then-known as the Housing Authority of the County of Los Angeles.

Hong said she was very passionate about the work, but found it "extraordinarily draining and emotionally burdensome."

"Being a legal aid lawyer was challenging and extremely satisfying at the same time," she said.

Less than four years into her career as a legal services attorney, Hong decided to take on a management position back at the Center for Law and Justice, where she became executive director.

She acknowledged she made this transition in part because serving in leadership provided a pay boost, though the post still paid less than most other jobs in the legal industry, she said.

Another motivating factor was Hong's desire to be in a position to "look at systems so that we can make a broader change" regarding issues such as legal aid funding.

Hong ultimately served as the center's top staffer for nearly seven years.

The experience helped her learn how to navigate funding requirements, handle fiscal planning and combat the various pressures the court system was facing amid budget cuts, she said.

She also became very familiar with the different partnerships among legal aid organizations and social service providers, Hong noted.

"That gave me a better perspective of the challenges not only for lawyers, but for organizations in the system we all operate in," Hong said.

In the fall of 2014, she left the legal aid world to become executive director for the Southern California Region of First Place for Youth, a nonprofit organization providing housing, education and employment services to foster and probation youth in Los Angeles. She later became the group's chief regional officer and interim CEO.

However, a job opening at the State Bar offering the opportunity to again pursue systems change enticed Hong back into legal services in January 2019.

As director of access and inclusion, she is charged with increasing access to justice for low- and moderate-income Californians, as well as working to diversify the legal profession.

"It is an ability for me to not only implement, but develop policies that I think will benefit vulnerable Californians on a statewide basis," Hong said.

Some leaders in the legal aid community said they were thrilled when the bar hired Hong.

Among her supporters is Silvia Argueta, executive director of Legal Aid Foundation of Los Angeles. They met about a decade ago at a fellowship program for legal aid executive directors.

"It is who she is and where she comes from that make Hellen just perfect for this position," Argueta said.

"Because Hellen has been a practitioner but also an executive director, she understands the pushes and pulls within a [legal aid] organization and the operational goals that we all have," she continued.

Salena Copeland, executive director of the Legal Aid Association of California, said there was some fear in the legal services community that the bar would hire someone from outside the state. Such a hire would have required the new director to spend a lot of time getting up to speed on the many different types of legal services organizations in the state, she said.

The position also came open at a time when the bar was considering significant changes to how it handles its legal aid responsibilities, which left the legal services community a bit on edge. Copeland said her organization was ecstatic when it learned Hong, who used to serve on the Legal Aid Association of California's board, was picked for the bar job.

"When Hellen was hired, it felt like we could take a breath," Copeland said. "Not only is she a well-recognized and well-respected person in the Los Angeles legal aid world, but she already knows the statewide players."

Copeland said she was also encouraged when she recently learned the bar had tapped Donna Hershkowitz, the agency's chief of programs, as interim executive director when Leah T. Wilson steps down from that role Jan. 17.

Hershkowitz, like Hong, worked as a legal aid lawyer early in her career.

"Both Donna and Hellen get these issues," Copeland said. "I like working with both of them a whole lot. I don't want to be so glib as to say it's a new day, but it is kind of a good opportunity to do real good."

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