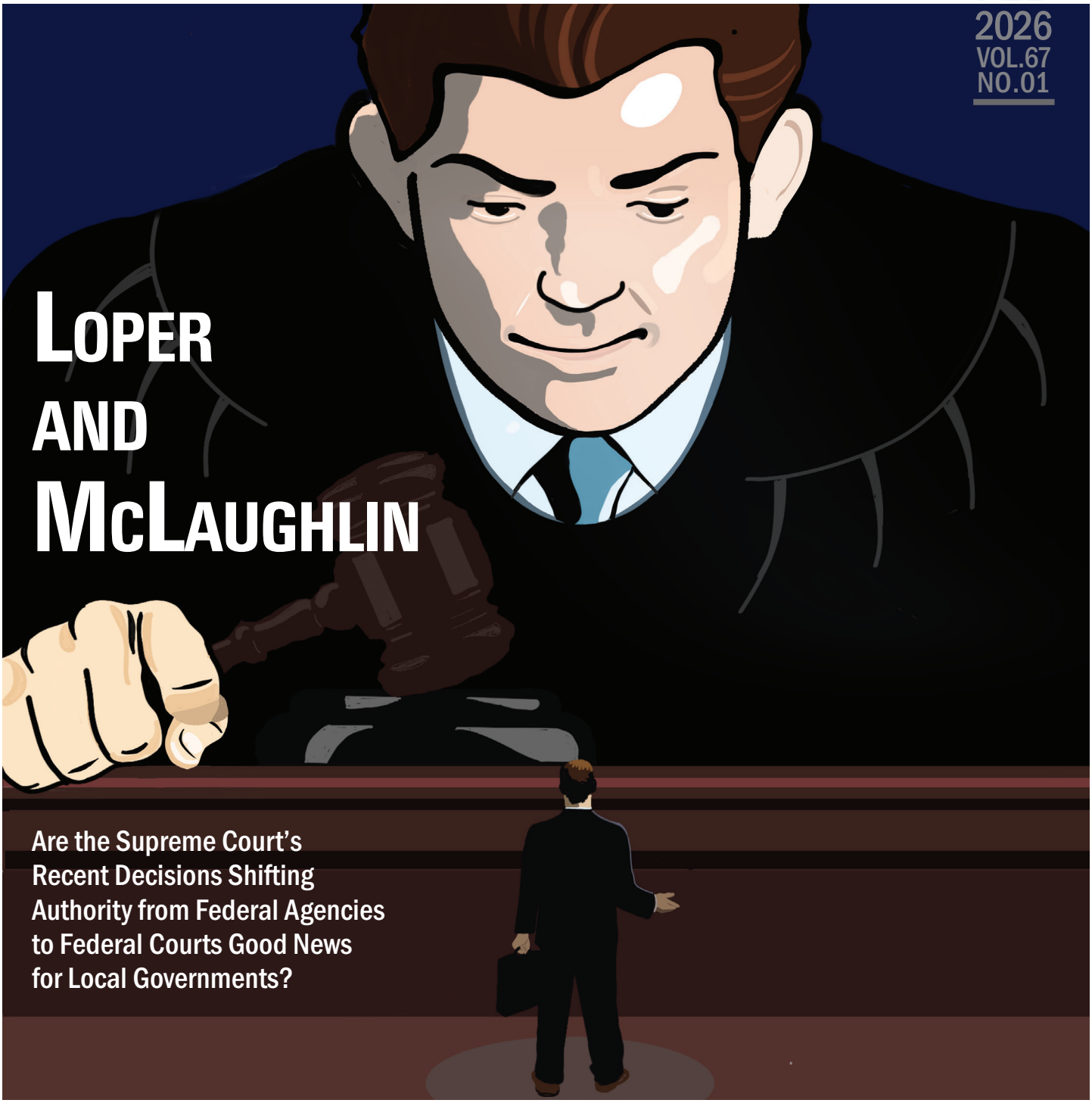
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LOPER AND MCLAUGHLIN

Are the Supreme Court's Recent Decisions Shifting Authority from Federal Agencies to Federal Courts Good News for Local Governments?



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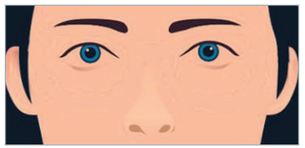
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01

Practical Applications of Public Service Motivation Research to Harness the Potential of Early Career Attorneys in a Municipal Law Office

by Sophia Hernandez, IMLA Fellow
Senior Deputy City Attorney
City of Durham, NC

Look around any municipal law conference, and it is clear that the municipal field tends to hire mid- to late-career attorneys. But how does an office build long-term institutional knowledge and bring in new ideas if it only hires from certain age and experience groups?

Prior to my hiring at the Durham City Attorney's Office (CAO), the youngest person in our office was 49 years old. Let me be clear, as someone who has recently joined the over-forty club, I am NOT implying that someone in their forties is out of new ideas. However, having supervised dozens of interns and externs and taught classes at a law school, I have witnessed very different approaches to office culture and client services from those who are 25+ years out of law school than those who are 25 years old. Both bring value to a diverse and thriving office. So, how does the municipal field actively work to harness the potential of early career attorneys to better serve local governments?

Over the last six years, I have contributed to the CAO's intentional introduction of municipal law to law students and early career attorneys. During the three and a half years I coordinated our extern/intern program, our office hosted 34 students from 4 local law schools. The students were talented and eager to learn about municipal law. Their sense of dedication, early legal acumen, and analysis impressed even tough client departments. Serving as the program coordinator instilled in me a certainty that some students, with guidance and supervision, could serve as municipal lawyers right after passing the bar. And many of our past students have gone into practice in the public sector: clerking at appellate and state supreme courts and the United States Supreme Court; working in direct-client services entities such as Legal Aid and public defender's offices; and serving in-house at housing authorities and legal advocacy organizations.

Every term during my tenure as coordinator, inevitably, a moment would come when one or more students would ask about job prospects in our office. Feeling pleased that this great field enticed them, I also felt guilty answering, "Well, we usually hire folks five to ten years out of law school. We want them to have built some experience elsewhere because we are not set up to train new lawyers." For context, historically, our office has had very little turnover. We are only 10 attorneys-strong, and folks tend to stay. When I got hired in 2018, the office had not

Since we could not expect an early-career attorney without prior municipal experience to have clear and specific interests within the field, our training plan facilitated Sarah's quick exposure to a variety of work. During her first twelve months, we asked Sarah to assist different attorneys.



hired anyone in eight years. And while I was given time to learn municipal law, I had also already spent eight and a half years in private practice. No one needed to teach or onboard me on foundational legal skills.

Fast-forwarding a few years, in the Winter of 2023, after dozens of talented students had graced our intern cubicles, one of our most senior colleagues retired. Faced with his departure, we explored a new approach to filling his role.[1] We decided to reclassify his senior position into one tailored for early-career attorneys: someone 0 to 3 years out of law school. Of course, little in local government is as easy as simply deciding. Because the associate attorney position was a new job classification, it required council approval.[2] Our memo to Council stated:

> Having hosted over 30 student externs/interns these last four years, the CAO has seen the great talent and passion young attorneys can bring to this work. Municipal law is a dynamic field that provides work/life balance and engaging and meaningful work to attorneys seeking work in the public sector. Young and early-career attorneys should have opportunities for entry into this career field. Further, this new classification enables the CAO to offer long-term growth and career development within the organization and is a meaningful step in the CAO's organizational plan.[3]

Luckily, Council applauded our efforts and approved the position on October 16, 2023. That same day, we were ready to post the job.

We acknowledged that welcoming an early-career attorney would require guidance and supervision different from what was customary in our office. Fortunately, as part of creating a robust intern/extern program, we had created a program manual, supervising guidelines for attorneys, project assignment forms, and other basic onboarding and training resources for municipal law. We had also fostered a culture in which all our attorneys invested and participated in the interns'/externs' development. It was a great starting point.

Our goal was to hire a high-performing, public-sector-minded colleague who would want to stay part of our team for decades. We applied key principles and practical applications of Public Sector Motivation ("PSM") from job creation to now, eighteen months into the tenure of our associate attorney hire. A concept developed in the 1990s to help reinvigorate and grow the public sector workforce, PSM is a person's "predisposition to respond to motives grounded primarily or uniquely in public institutions."[4] Recognizing that "the importation of private sector management has not always yielded benefits for performance in the public sector,"[5] over the last thirty-five years, public administration and management scholars have created a body of work that provides public sector managers with useful insights into motivating public employees. A review of 144 PSM articles between 2008 and 2015 identified five key lessons having practical applicability:

1. Use PSM as a selection tool;[6]
2. Facilitate PSM through intra-office cooperation and a supportive work environment;[7]
3. Convey the significance of the work;[8]
4. Enculturate newcomers into public service values; and
5. Build leadership based on public sector values.

Below, I discuss how we incorporated the first four lessons into the process of welcoming our new associate attorney: (1) posting the job, (2) hiring, (3) onboarding and training, and (4) supervision.

1. Using PSM as a Selection Tool

We first used PSM as a part of our selection process by attempting to attract those with high PSM.[9] PSM studies recommend "job advertisements as means for projecting organizational images and for values as signals to job candidates, both important elements relevant to attracting high public service motivation staff."[10] While drafting the associate attorney job posting, I reviewed dozens of job advertisements from public-sector entities. I also connected with several former and current externs/interns to learn what attracted them to a public sector job posting and which factors were most important to them when considering a public sector position. We received 97 applications.

We also used PSM as a selection tool in our resume review and initial screening interviews. Because the position was targeted at early-career attorneys, we looked beyond work experience in resumes. Instead, we relied on programs of study, college jobs, and volunteer work to establish high PSM. For our screening interviews, we asked each applicant why they (a) wanted to work in the public sector and (b) specifically serve our city.

We were similarly committed to PSM in our finalists' interviews. As the research supports, "[a]ttracting and selecting employees with high public service motivation is a highly reliable way to capture the benefits of public service motivation, enhancing both employee performance and agency mission accomplishment."[11] We crafted questions that allowed us to better gauge PSM in each of the finalists: Why do you want to work in municipal law? What gives you the most satisfaction in your work? Where do you see yourself professionally in five years? Excluding your role as a lawyer, who are you at work?

Focusing on public service at each step of the process led to the hiring of a bright, talented early-career attorney with high PSM, Sarah Laws. A year and a half into her time with the CAO, Sarah feels "lucky" she found this work and this office. And while it is early still, she claims she is here for the long haul. That kind of enthusiasm for the work and the office cannot but contribute positively to her relationships with her colleagues and client departments.

2. Generating PSM through Cooperation

To "create a supportive work environment that models and reinforces public service motivation,"[12] our onboarding plan encouraged Sarah to meet one-on-one with each attorney to learn about their portfolios and their particular path to public service. CAO leadership laid the groundwork for those one-on-one meetings by emphasizing the importance of welcoming Sarah, helping her learn municipal law, and acclimating her to the organization.

Since we could not expect an early-career attorney without prior municipal experience to have clear and specific interests within the field, our training plan facilitated Sarah's quick exposure to a variety of work. During her first twelve months, we asked Sarah to assist different attorneys. She showed an eagerness to learn and a willingness to alleviate others' workload. The attorneys appreciated her enthusiasm and enjoyed teaching her. As a result, Sarah felt welcome and supported in her new public-sector workplace.[13]

3. Conveying the Significance of the Job

PSM research suggests managers should convey the significance of the relevant public sector job by "creating opportunities for direct contacts between employees and beneficiaries."[14] In line with this PSM practical lesson, we encouraged Sarah to invest time in connecting with departmental staff, seeing firsthand their services to the city. "Field trips and site visits!" We told her. Take a shift with the fire department. Visit the municipal cemeteries. Sit in on basic law enforcement training. Ride along with a code enforcement officer. Attend a parks department community event. The possibilities were many. The goal was simple: to show that the CAO's work supports the dedicated staff on the front lines.

The visits allowed Sarah to learn more about the values of her different departments so that she can provide legal solutions with those values in mind. Further, the visits led to positive relationship-building between staff and our office.[15] Staff often appreciate it when a city attorney wants to know more about their work. They share what they do for our community with eagerness and pride. That, in turn, helped build pride and eagerness in Sarah to serve her departments. PSM elevated all-around.

Also, within her first three months, we coordinated meetings with each of her department directors, her direct supervisor, and Sarah. We asked each director to address (a) how the CAO serves their department, (b) large, anticipated projects, and (c) how our office can meet their needs in the future. This proactive introduction and briefing on key upcoming public projects inspired Sarah and fueled her enthusiasm for the opportunities ahead in her municipal career.

4. Enculturating New Hires into the Office's Public Service Values

While Sarah joined our office with high PSM, PSM research highlights that "imbuing public sector values through

formal and informal training is an important way to create employee–organization convergence that produces a stronger public service ethos." We focused on introducing our office's *specific* public service values by providing both formal and informal values-exposure opportunities.[16] Informally, CAO leadership regularly invites attorneys to discuss their work and its impact at staff meetings. As previously noted, Sarah was also encouraged to collaborate with various attorneys and gain valuable insights into what they appreciate about the organization and municipal work.[17] Additionally, we have facilitated informal mentorship from dynamic senior assistant city attorneys who have spent their careers in public service.[18]

Formally, we developed a deliberate, structured approach to establishing the associate attorney–supervisor relationship.[19] And I have had the pleasure of serving as Sarah's supervisor. Even before her first day, we created a training and onboarding plan with the goal that Sarah would operate independently with a full portfolio in two years. Leading up to that moment, she takes on a division or a discrete project at a time. We intentionally crafted a portfolio of departments and divisions to expose Sarah to a wide variety of work involving direct service departments and city volunteer boards (*e.g.*, code enforcement, the fire department, parks and recreation, and quasi-judicial boards). As she takes on new work, we set aside time to reflect on her progress and discuss feedback.[20] During her first few months, we met daily. In our meetings, I serve as a mentor and advisor.[21] I share my PSM values. I am not someone simply interested in the work product, but in her long-term development in our office.[22]

It has been critical to be available and flexible as she has grown. Sarah has demonstrated skills and interests that were not initially noticed during the hiring process. She has exceeded our expectations. Twice over, we have accelerated our initial growth and development plan. However, there have also been moments of course correction. For those, I prioritized listening,[23] transparency, and accountability. I also openly reflect on and share with her my own growth experiences from the early stages of my career in municipal law. Afterall, "[s]tories are a powerful tool for teaching people what's important and what's not, what works and what doesn't, and what is and what could be."[24] Often, our conversations lead us back to the impact of the work on the organization and community. And we adjust and move forward because we are motivated to serve.

Now eighteen months into her tenure, we have established numerous practices and systems to warmly welcome yet another high-performing, public-sector–minded early-career attorney. And Sarah is serving on the hiring committee. Thus far, applying practical PSM research insights to the intentional design of our hiring and onboarding process has shown to be a successful strategy for unlocking the potential of early-career attorneys and sustaining our office's excellence. **ML**

Notes

1. James M. Kouzes & Barry Posner, The Leadership Challenge, 138-64 (7th ed. 2023) (a key practice of exemplary leadership is to "challenge the process" by searching for opportunities for innovative ways to improve).
2. Durham, N.C., City Code § 42-4 (2006).
3. Durham, N.C., Durham City Council Action Agenda, Item No. 7, *New Position Classification – Associate Attorney*, https://cityordinances.durhamnc.gov/OnBaseAgendaOnline/Meetings/ViewMeeting?id=608&doctype=1 (Oct. 16, 2023).
4. James L. Perry & Lois Recascino Wise, *The Motivational Bases of Public Service*, 50 Pub. Admin. Rev. 367, 367-73 (1990).
5. Robert K. Christiansen et al., *Public Service Motivation Research: Lessons for Practice*, 77 Pub. Admin. Rev. 529, 529 (2017).
6. *Id.* at 532; *see also* Adrian Ritz et al., *Public Service Motivation: A Systematic Literature Review and Outlook*, 76 Pub. Admin. Rev. 414, 421 (2016).
7. Christensen, 77 Pub. Admin. Rev. at 533-34.
8. *Id.* at 535.
9. *Id.* at 532 (PSM research warns that overlooking PSM is a "serious omission in existing recruitment processes").
10. *Id.* at 533 (*citing* Christian Waldner, *Do Public and Private Recruiters Look for Different Employees? The Role of Public Service Motivation*, 35 Int'l J. of Pub. Admin. 70, 70-9 (2012); Torben Beck Jorgensen & Mark R. Rutgers, *Tracing Public Values Change: A Historical Study of Civil Service Job Advertisements*, 6 Contemp. Readings in L. and Soc. Just. 59, 59-80 (2014)).
11. Christensen, 77 Pub. Admin. Rev. at 32; *see also* Ritz, 76 Pub. Admin. Rev. at 421.
12. *Id.* at 534.
13. *Id.* ("Organizations that intentionally nurture public service motivation develop stronger ties between the organization and employee values and goals.").
14. *Id.* at 535.
15. *Id.* (recommended model rests on "the importance of interpersonal relationships between employees and beneficiaries that enable employees to experience their work as important and meaningful.") (*citing* Adam M. Grant, *Relational Job Design and the Motivation to Make a Prosocial Difference*, 32 Acad. of Mgmt. Rev. 393, 393-417 (2007)).
16. Christensen, 77 Pub. Admin. Rev. at 536.
17. Kouzes, The Leadership Challenge at 207 ("leaders need to develop cooperative goals and roles, support norms of reciprocity, structure projects to promote joint efforts, and maintain durable social connections").
18. Christensen, 77 Pub. Admin. Rev. at 536 (formal and informal mentoring "may impart 'craft knowledge' and create a prosocial environment that may be particularly valued by new generations of employees") (*citing* Barry Bozeman & Mary K. Feeney, *Public Management Mentoring: A Three-Tier Model*, 29 Rev. of Pub. Personnel Admin. 134, 134-57 (2009)).
19. Kouzes, The Leadership Challenge at xxii ("leadership is fundamentally a relationship").
20. *Id.* at 78 (". . . measurement and feedback are essential to increased efforts to improve performance").
21. UNC School of Government, Leading for Results – Civic Fellows, https://www.sog.unc.edu/courses/leading-results-civic-fellows (last visited June 24, 2025) (In Fall 2023, I participated in the *Leading for Results* two-week intensive program offered by the University of North Carolina's School of Government. The program "aims to enhance personal and organizational leadership skills and competencies. Participants complete the program with a deeper understanding of the leadership strengths, skills for improving their organizations, and a renewed passion for public service.").
22. Kouzes, The Leadership Challenge at 243 ("When leaders coach, educate, enhance self-determination, and otherwise share power they're demonstrating deep trust in and respect for others' abilities.").
23. Len Kill Kelley & Debra Robinson, *Effective Conversations: The Genetic Code of Relationships*, The Trusted Leader: Building the Relationships that Make Government Work, 81-111 (2012) (listening "is at the epicenter of successful leadership.").
24. Kouzes, The Leadership Challenge at 77.





02

The Power of Proximity

Local Matters: A Year of Getting Proximate as a New Municipal Attorney

by Sarah Laws
Associate Attorney
City of Durham, NC

I stumbled into the world of municipal law via a job post shared by the Dean of Public Interest and Pro Bono at my alma mater after completing a two-year fellowship at a non-profit. Like many, I did not attend law school with aspirations of becoming a municipal attorney, but I was instantly intrigued by the post. Municipal law aligns with many of my professional priorities. Like public interest work, municipal law offered the opportunity to contribute to my local community. It also offered the chance to maintain a diverse legal practice, an increasingly rare prospect in public interest. Further, the in-house nature of the role offered the opportunity to develop and maintain strong relationships with the client, unlike in litigation, where representation is naturally limited. Despite having no background in municipal law, I decided to apply.

Now, nearly two years into my role as an Associate Attorney with the City of Durham, these aspects of municipal law contribute to the immense satisfaction I get from my job. However, the transition has been challenging. As an early-career attorney in a municipal law office, you are still finding your feet as an attorney. You are learning multiple new substantive areas of law that are often not covered in law school, while developing the soft skills necessary to advise department directors who are experts in their respective fields and have been in public service since you were born.

As an early-career attorney, it can be easy to fall back on focusing exclusively on the "more lawyerly" substantive law in an attempt to ground yourself. After all, a lawyer's value comes from their legal knowledge and training, right? However, in my first years of municipal practice, I have found Bryan Stevenson's theory of "the power of proximity"[1] to be a grounding principle while wading into the waters of municipal law. For me, that has meant forging connections and developing relationships with my departmental clients, the municipal bar, and the community that I serve. This in turn has helped me better understand the functions of a municipal corporation and my role as a municipal attorney. For folks just beginning their municipal careers, getting proximate to municipal stakeholders is a great way to develop the equally important soft skills needed to succeed as a municipal lawyer and contextualize the practice of municipal law.

I. Persuading Public Servants: Getting Proximate to Departmental Clients

While I think that prioritizing face-to-face time with clients is important for any attorney building new relationships, it is particularly important as an early-career municipal attorney because you will likely be taking over your departments from attorneys with more substantive knowledge and experience than you. Rather than trying to fight that, I have focused on building strong relationships with my departments to help ease the sting of a "downgrade" to someone new to municipal law. Showing a genuine interest and enthusiasm in the work



Sarah Laws on a ride-along at Fire Station 1

that my departments do has allowed me to accelerate that relationship-building process because, like municipal law offices, departmental clients are made up of public servants who are mission-oriented.

Early on, my supervisor suggested that I schedule ride-alongs with my departments, and I jumped at the opportunity. Within my first few months on the job, I had completed a twelve-hour shift on Engine 1 with the Fire Department, inspected playgrounds and under-construction facilities with the Parks and Recreation Department, and conducted housing and nuisance code inspections with the Neighborhood Improvement Services Department. By prioritizing on-the-ground experiences, I was able to better understand the day-to-day operations, business needs, and realities of my departments' work. Additionally, taking time out of my day to participate in the work went a long way toward helping me gain credibility with departmental staff. Ride-alongs in particular helped combat the stereotype of lawyers operating from within their ivory towers.

This early engagement has had a direct impact on my ability to represent my departmental clients. As just one example, when a lawsuit landed on my desk, I knew there was a unique context that was missing from the complaint because I had conducted a site inspection of the subject property with staff. I knew what follow-up questions to ask staff and was able to craft a strong narrative in my responsive pleadings, ultimately leading to dismissal of the case. More broadly, I have been able to communicate more effectively with my departments because I can better "speak their language," as I have additional context for the department-specific terminology they use. Building strong, collaborative relationships with my departments has meant they are more willing to come to me when problems first arise, and I am better able to formulate practical legal solutions that take into account the context in which my departments operate.

In short, get to know your departments! While ride-alongs are great, your engagement with departments does not have to be as intensive. In an increasingly digital world, making the walk over to your departments for meetings is a great way to jumpstart those relationships. Schedule regular check-ins to build rapport and be proactive about anticipated legal needs. Early investment in these departmental relationships will help you in your transition to municipal law.

II. Learning From Local Government Lawyers: Getting Proximate to the Municipal Bar

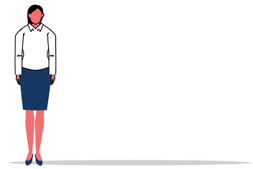
If you are reading this article, you probably do not need me to tell you to engage with the municipal bar. But if you need an extra push or are trying to give a new municipal attorney the extra push, here it is. Municipal law generally requires attorneys to have an extremely broad knowledge base, an increasingly rare trait in legal practice. Thus, municipal law practice is unique in its demands for lawyers to be nimble and adaptable. As an early-career attorney, this can feel overwhelmingly different from how the practice of law was portrayed in law school and from other legal experiences, such as internships and clinics. The good news is that municipal lawyers love municipal law and are more than willing to help new municipal attorneys!

There are myriad ways to engage with other municipal attorneys, so you can certainly find an option that works well for you. I have engaged with municipal attorneys through events as informal and local as getting lunch with attorneys in my office, to as formal and widespread as attending our state municipal bar conferences. It can be a new, or at least infrequent, experience for municipal law offices to have an early-career attorney join the ranks, so you may have to take a bit more initiative. I am not a natural networker, so signing up for more structured opportunities, such as the IMLA mentorship program, has helped me hold myself accountable and ensured I have had ongoing discussions about my transition to municipal practice. Through the municipal bar, I have received support not just with the many substantive questions I have encountered, but also with the adjustment to a unique practice area.

Engaging with municipal attorneys through a mix of formal networking and informal conversation has been crucial for learning the art of municipal law practice. While your office is the most convenient place to start, make sure to branch out and connect with municipal attorneys in other jurisdictions, particularly if you practice in a smaller office. Casting a wide net allows you to gain different perspectives and learn how different attorneys approach municipal work. And remember to sign up to be an IMLA mentor yourself once you have been in municipal practice for ten years!

III. Extra-Curricular Engagement: Getting Proximate to the Community

Being actively involved in my local community has always been a priority of mine. However, after starting in municipal law, I recommitted to engaging with my local community outside of work through hobbies and volunteering. Being an active community member has allowed me to build personal connections with colleagues—both directly, through mutual participation in community activities, and indirectly, by



In an increasingly digital world, making the walk over to your departments for meetings is a great way to jumpstart those relationships.

demonstrating to my departmental clients that I care about the work they do outside of a professional context. This external engagement is especially important if you do not live in the municipality where you work, as it will give you a better understanding of the community you represent.

Being involved in local community groups has overlapped with my practice of municipal law more than I anticipated. I was a member of Batalá Durham, a local chapter of an international samba-reggae percussion group, before joining the City Attorney's Office. In fact, I think it helped me stand out in my initial phone screener. Once I started practicing municipal law, the fact that the city has an enumerated exception in our noise ordinance because of said band—predating both my time at the City Attorney's Office and in the band—became much more meaningful. It is a concrete example of how my work tangibly impacts the Durham community every day.

More importantly, my involvement in the community has strengthened my professional relationships by allowing me to connect with the people I work with on a more personal level. Whether that has been through volunteering at a local park clean-up day, playing on a baseball team and catching an outfield assist thrown by the Parks and Recreation Engagement Coordinator, or chatting with a City Council member after a drum show, each time I engage with someone outside of our traditional workspace, they see me as not just an attorney but also as an active member of our community.

Engage broadly with the community you represent in a way that is meaningful to you. This can take on many different forms, from local organizations to volunteer groups to online communities. And don't discount that last one; I learned of two issues through our local Reddit community that later ended up on my desk. Having the heads-up was nice!

While municipal law can seem overwhelming when you first start, getting proximate to your departmental clients, the municipal bar, and the local community can help ease your transition into the field. As an early-career attorney, engaging with each of these groups has allowed me to better contextualize the practice of municipal law, build strong working relationships with my departmental clients, and gain a greater sense of purpose in my work as a municipal attorney. ML

Notes

1. Bryan Stevenson, The Power of Proximity at Fortune Magazine's CEO Initiative (June 26, 2018), https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1RyAwZIHo4Y.

BECOME AN IMLA FELLOW

THE PRESTIGIOUS IMLA LOCAL GOVERNMENT FELLOWS PROGRAM WAS ESTABLISHED TO RECOGNIZE ATTORNEYS AS LEGAL SPECIALISTS IN THE FIELD OF LOCAL GOVERNMENT LAW AND TO ENCOURAGE ATTORNEY PROFICIENCY AND COMPETENCY IN THE LOCAL GOVERNMENT LEGAL FIELD.

The Program is offered to applicants having been admitted to the bar for not less than five years with not less than five years experience in the field of local government law and at least three years of which must have been as a municipal attorney, assistant municipal attorney, county attorney, assistant county attorney, state league counsel, or assistant state league counsel. Local government lawyers practicing in Canada who meet these requirements are also eligible to apply. To apply, applicants must also be in good standing and full members of IMLA.

FOR MORE INFORMATION EMAIL: **INFO@IMLA.ORG**
OR VISIT: **IMLA.ORG/LOCAL-GOVERNMENT-FELLOWS-PROGRAM/**

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03

How Philly's Law Department Builds a Stronger Workforce: 5 Key Practices

by Kadidja Nanakasse
Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion Coordinator,
Executive Office, City of Philadelphia, PA

The Philadelphia Law Department, led by City Solicitor Renee Garcia, has 286 attorneys and 130 paraprofessionals. The department handles a wide range of legal matters that shape not only how the city operates, but also how policies and services impact Philadelphia residents and communities every day.

However, doing this work requires more than just sharp legal minds; it takes a supported and growing workforce. To succeed in our mission, we need to ensure our legal professionals have the tools, training, and support to thrive. When our team thrives, so does our city, which is why I'm excited to share "How Philly's Law Department Builds a Stronger Workforce: 5 Key Practices."

1. Creating Clear Career Pathways for Internal Growth

To provide our team members with a clear path to advancement within the department, the Law Department created career ladders for both attorneys and paraprofessionals.

The career ladder for our attorneys outlines the duties and qualifications for the positions of Assistant City Solicitor, Deputy City Solicitor, Senior Attorney, and Divisional Deputy City Solicitor. The career ladders were created to help attorneys develop their abilities, grow in their practice areas, identify where they are performing at a higher level, and move up the departmental ladder. The evaluation period is an ideal time for staff to reflect on their performance and goals, while using the career ladders to guide their professional development. By helping our staff to set attainable goals throughout the year, the career ladders serve as a reference point for tracking progress during quarterly check-ins. The career ladder also serves as a valuable tool for supervisors to analyze their staff's overall performance and advocate for promotions or salary increases.

We recently introduced career ladders for exempt paraprofessional roles, including Legal Assistants, Senior Legal Assistants, and Legal Assistant Supervisors, as they play a vital role in the department's functions. To ensure the career ladders accurately captured the abilities, duties, and opportunities for growth for paraprofessionals, we established a working group to define what success and growth in these roles look like. They met over several sessions to make this process inclusive while capturing the voices of all involved.

"The career ladders not only help our employees to feel supported on their career journeys but serve as a tool to promote transparency in the performance evaluation process and provide consistent criteria for each role in the department. Our staff can look to the career ladders to know what is expected of them and what upward mobility looks like in their position." - **Renee Garcia, City Solicitor**

To support our team, the Law Department and the City of Philadelphia offer several resources that can help make a difference. For example, staff can benefit from flexing their time. If you need to leave early one day due to unexpected life circumstances, you can work extra hours another day.



2. Recruitment Pipelines and Inclusive Hiring

The Law Department has achieved great success through standardizing our hiring procedure.

We found that our hiring process was inconsistent across the department. This led to lengthy periods between when a position became open and when a candidate was hired, resulting in the loss of strong candidate interest during the application process. To continue building a strong workforce and minimize vacancy duration, we spent months in planning sessions with our hiring managers to create a streamlined hiring process.

From the moment a position becomes available, we now have a well-defined schedule to help our hiring managers find the best applicants to fill roles as quickly as possible. Through resume screening, panel coordination, scheduling, and carefully selected interview questions from our interview bank, the Diversity and Development team collaborates closely with managers to offer support. In addition to reducing the workload for our busy hiring managers, this procedure ensures that we are efficient, equitable, and consistent. We received positive feedback for including staff with diverse experiences, backgrounds, and titles on our three-person hiring panels, especially since panel size had previously varied by unit.

We have also realized that the best recruitment strategies start with creating pipelines. For this reason, the Law Department provides internship opportunities to high school, undergraduate, and law students year-round. Many of our law student interns later return as Assistant City Solicitors as part of our Fall Class Associate cohort.

Furthermore, we are pleased to partner with the A.J. Autism Institute Transition Pathways program at Drexel University, which offers neurodiverse students meaningful internship opportunities to develop their professional skills and prepare for future employment. In 2025, we were thrilled to be recognized by the program as "Internship Site of the Year," and we look forward to continuing our collaboration.

Our outreach doesn't stop there. We actively participate in local affinity groups, share job openings, and participate in community and professional events to raise awareness of the Law Department.

3. Community in the Workplace

"The best legal work is accomplished when all our staff members feel empowered to be themselves and have a sense of belonging in the workplace. As such a large department, it's important to us to bring people together for moments of interpersonal connection in addition to our daily tasks." - **Tianna Kalogerakis, Director of Professional Development, Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion**

It's no secret that we spend much of our day with our colleagues, so it's important to create spaces where we can connect, celebrate, and find joy together. At the Law Department, we take workplace community seriously.

We take pride in having three active committees: the Diversity, Equity & Inclusion (DEI) Committee, the Public Service Committee (PSC), and the Professional Development Committee (PDC). Each committee contributes significantly to the development of our workplace culture. These committees make meaningful programming happen year-round, whether through mentorship pairings (PDC), an annual school supply drive (PSC), or a potluck with guest speakers during Hispanic Heritage Month (DEI). Each committee is co-chaired by two staff members who serve two-year terms, ensuring the introduction of new ideas and fresh perspectives.

In addition to committee programming, we make room for lighter moments of connection too - from book exchanges and afternoon craft lunches (where coworkers get together to work on individual creative projects) to holiday customs like our highly anticipated Great Bake-Off. Our Child Welfare Unit also takes the holiday spirit to the next level with a floor-wide decorating contest that sparks friendly and sometimes intense competition.

All these opportunities allow team members to connect beyond case files and deadlines, building a workplace that feels supportive, inclusive, and fun.

4.Professional Development Opportunities

"There is always room for growth, especially professional growth," is one of my favorite quotes. And the Law Department is here to help you when those opportunities align with your practice area and the department's mission.

Our yearly two-day Continuing Legal Education (CLE) Conference, which brings together more than 350 city attorneys, is a prime example. Each panel is coordinated and facilitated by a Law Department attorney, providing not only valuable content but also opportunities for leadership, coaching, and raising the department's profile.

Beyond the CLE, the department hosts trainings throughout the year tailored to specific practice groups, including Litigation Onboarding training for new litigators, the Corporate and Tax Series for transactional attorneys, and specialized onboarding for the Child Welfare Unit attorneys and paraprofessionals. Most recently, we launched the Paraprofessional Education Series designed to build skills and capacity for our para staff.

"Through our CLE, committee participation, and volunteer opportunities, we encourage our staff members to take ownership of work they are passionate about, and to continue to grow their expertise through training and real experience. This investment in our staff's skillset builds confident leaders at all levels of our organization." - **Renee Garcia, City Solicitor**

5. Supporting Work-Life Balance and Mental Health

Working in an office five days a week on matters that affect the everyday lives of our staff as residents of the City they work for can be both rewarding and, at times, draining. The work we do is important and impactful, but it's equally important to maintain balance in our work-life, home-life, and mental health. After all, how can we do our best work without a healthy balance?

To support our team, the Law Department and the City of Philadelphia offer several resources that can help make a difference. For example, staff can benefit from flexing their time. If you need to leave early one day due to unexpected life circumstances, you can work extra hours another day. The city also has a partnership with the Wellthy back-up care program, which helps parents with last-minute childcare needs and even reimburses certain childcare costs, easing the challenge of balancing work and home life.

Within the Law Department, we also organize pop-up wellness rooms: spaces with dim lighting, calming music, sensory machines, and activities like puzzles, stress balls, and cozy pillows, giving staff a chance to step away and recharge. The Child Welfare Unit leads by example through its Morale Committee, which creates opportunities for staff to support one another in the amazing work they do supporting Philadelphia youth. They also arrange therapy dog visits for staff throughout the year, which are greatly enjoyed by staff across the Department.

These efforts remind us that taking care of our people is just as important as taking care of our city. Investing in and building a strong workforce ultimately builds a stronger, more united Philadelphia.

Closing

The City of Philadelphia Law Department continues to evolve in its effort to make our workforce stronger, not only in the work we do for the city but how we invest in our people, who are the foundation of our success. By supporting career growth pathways, fostering workplace connections, implementing equitable hiring practices, and prioritizing wellness, we're actively and continuously building a workforce that reflects the strength and diversity of Philadelphia. ML

PLAN AHEAD TO JOIN US AT UPCOMING EVENTS

SEMINARS
at Omni Shoreham Hotel

2026 IMLA Mid-Year Seminar
Washington, D.C.: April 10 – 13, 2026

2027 IMLA Mid-Year Seminar
Washington, D.C.: April 16 – 19, 2027

2028 IMLA Mid-Year Seminar
Washington, D.C.: April 6 – 9, 2028

2029 IMLA Mid-Year Seminar
Washington, D.C.: April 20 – 23, 2029

CONFERENCES

2026 IMLA 91st Annual Conference
Salt Lake City, Utah: Hyatt Regency Salt Lake City
September 23 – 27, 2026

2027 IMLA 92nd Annual Conference
Denver, Colorado: Hyatt Regency Denver Convention Ctr
October 14 – 18, 2027

2028 IMLA 93rd Annual Conference
Chicago, Illinois: Hyatt Regency Chicago
September 9 – 13, 2028

IMLA