

Secondments Put Winston & Strawn Associates at the DA's Table

The firm says its program deploying midlevel associates to work with two big-city prosecutors' offices has been a standout success.

By Patrick Smith

For litigators in the early stages of their careers, nothing can beat courtroom experience.

But that experience isn't always easy to come by in Big Law, where clients shelling out huge fees don't want untested talent taking the reins before a judge or jury.

Chicago-founded Winston & Strawn is tackling the problem in a way that it says has benefits not only for the firm and its associates, but also for heavily burdened local prosecutors' offices: secondments.

Similar to corporate secondments, when a lawyer embeds with a client's legal department, Winston & Strawn places fifth- and sixth-year associates with district or state's attorneys—so far in Illinois and Texas.

The associates sit as first chair for misdemeanor cases, making key decisions under the supervision of seasoned prosecutors. The firm, which says the program



Photo: Diego M. Radzinski/ALM

is also a strong recruiting tool, plans to expand both the number of associates involved and the number of agencies with which it partners.

"Feedback from the district and state's attorneys has been overwhelmingly positive," George Lombardi, co-chair of Winston & Strawn's litigation practice, said in an email. "They found our associates to be great additions to their teams and to have a high level of work ethic and dedication. We look forward to continuing the program with all of

our existing partners and adding new partner agencies as well."

Grant Schmidt, who will be a seventh-year associate at Winston in January, was assigned to the district attorney's office in Dallas.

"I was brought on just like I was a new ADA," Schmidt said. "They put me in a court with a judge who liked to go to trial. We went to trial all the time."

Schmidt said he took care of matters ranging from misdemeanor assault to theft, drug possession and resisting arrest.



George Lombardi of Winston & Strawn. (Courtesy photo)

"I get emails from my friends all the time about this opportunity," Schmidt said. "They all want to know, 'How did this happen? Who can I talk to about it?' I think our firm's relationship with the DA's office really helped us."

Jaime Simon, a soon-to-be seventh-year associate in Winston's Chicago office, was assigned to the Cook County State's Attorney's office in the fall of 2018.

"I was assigned to traffic," Simon said. "So I would handle DUI cases and traffic-related misdemeanors."

She said staff lawyers there took the time to teach, even with their sometimes chaotic schedules.

"It's a big commitment on both ends," Simon said. "But it has been beneficial to everyone."

Lombardi agrees. The program is now offered in Chicago,

where the firm was founded, and Dallas, where the firm has seen recent growth and enjoys a respected IP practice.

"In our established markets, we've been able to leverage existing relationships and have been pleased with the response and interest in the secondment program by our partner agencies," Lombardi said. "We also have been calling up agencies that we haven't previously cooperated with and explaining the program to them."

Although they're not widespread, some other firms offer similar programs. Cozen O'Connor, founded in Philadelphia, recently celebrated the **10th year** of its partnership with the Philadelphia DA's Office. The firm's associates work out of the DA's office for a full year, much longer than the three-month stay that Winston & Strawn associates have been afforded.

Not everyone is completely sold on the benefits of such programs. Robert Seiden, a former prosecutor in the Manhattan DA's Office who now runs an investigations firm, said the government's job is to enforce the law, not provide a training ground for private lawyers.

"As a prosecutor, you have an obligation to do justice. You have

an obligation to the state," he said. "If you have no experience in the criminal or prosecutorial sector, there are a lot of issues that surround it that you don't get on the civil side."

He said the benefits may be great for law firms like Winston & Strawn, and he stressed that he didn't doubt its lawyers' skill. But he said the rights of defendants are too great to risk muddying the prosecutorial waters. "It's a big power," he said.

Still, the Winston & Strawn program is winning fans both inside and outside the firm.

"As the second largest prosecutor's office in the country, we value the opportunity to provide external partnerships and resources," a spokesperson for the Cook County State's Attorney's office said in an email. "We have found that this platform is mutually beneficial and rewarding—not only for the associates but also our prosecutors, who readily engage in an exchange of resources in and out of the courtroom."

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