

LSUC launches Justicia project

The Law Society of Upper Canada has recruited over 40 firms to take part in a pilot project it hopes will help identify ways to keep more women in private practice.

The Justicia Think Tank — the creation of which was one of nine recommendations from the law society's working group on the retention of women in private practice — will see participating firms committed to four goals:

- adopting an internal system to keep statistical data on gender;
- reviewing current policies on maternity, paternity, and adoption leave, along with flexible work arrangements, with an eye on having written policies established by 2011;
- sharing information on



Kara Sutherland

business development and networking opportunities for women; and

- working with the LSUC in 2011 to adopt models for mentoring and skills development that target women's needs, and bolster their spot in law firm leadership.

Firms will be split into three working groups, with regional firms of six to 25 lawyers, firms of 25 to 100 lawyers, and firms of over 100 lawyers working together respectively.

Lawyer Kara Sutherland, Fraser Milner Casgrain LLP's representative to Justicia, says law society backing and the new think tank are keys to ending the lingering problem of departing women lawyers. "By creating this think tank, it



provides a forum for firms to come together and address the issues and the problems in an open and honest way, and figure out through initiatives some firms may be doing on their own how we can co-ordinate efforts, how we can share policies and best practices," she says.

Alan Farrer, managing partner of participating mid-size Toronto firm

Thomson Rogers, hopes the project will help his firm find ways to keep more associates. "We're trying to create an environment where we're going to retain all our associates, including our female associates, and we're trying to come up with a way in which we can organize our practice so that it's not only feasible but it's something someone would really want to get involved in," he says.

SmithValeriotte LLP lawyer Michelle Dwyer is the point person for her Guelph, Ont., firm's Justicia contribution. She says the 20-lawyer office's six female counsel and two articling students run up against the same challenges as colleagues across the province and are eager to compare notes. "How do you put in the hours and

get there before the daycare closes at six? How do you meet your commitments to the firm, to the community, while most of the time — I think it's fair to say — also being the primary caregiver and grocery shopper and dentist-appointment maker, and all those sorts of things?" says Dwyer. "We all have a lot of balls in the air. It's just a question of trying to make sure that there's a way of keeping them all in the air and also keeping your own health and sanity."

The Justicia project was approved by Convocation in May, along with a suite of other offerings aimed at making private practice more accessible for women, such as a parental-leave benefit and locum service. A report released in April

indicated that while women represented about 51 per cent of Ontario's population in 2001, female lawyers at that time made up 32 per cent of the legal profession and 24 per cent of the lawyers in private practice. Women currently represent 37 per cent of the legal profession and 28 per cent of lawyers in private practice, stated the report.

The report estimated that firms incur turnover costs of \$315,000 when a four-year associate leaves.

The LSUC is still signing up law firms for the Justicia Think Tank project. Contact Josée Bouchard at (416) 947-3984, or e-mail jbouchard@lsuc.on.ca.

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