

Resident at law: Florida lawyers push new concept

Law residents could learn; firms could capitalize

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Ben Diamond

The resident at law concept was born in July 2011 when [Laird Lile](#) sat in a Florida Bar meeting wondering about the future of the state's 2,500 new lawyers since there were not 2,500 jobs for them.

Lile, a Naples trusts and estates lawyer, now has what he believes is the state's only resident at law working for him, which he said is an answer to the lack of jobs for new lawyers.

In the year since he hired resident [Patrick Mize](#), the firm's revenue has increased, his clients have benefited and the law profession is gaining an effective member with experience.

"The concept hasn't gotten the traction I'd like," Lile said. "As a profession, I think it's time to acknowledge that it's dangerous to turn these new lawyers as loose as we have."

The young lawyers division of the Florida Bar has embraced the idea and currently is creating a webinar to promote the concept, said [Ben Diamond](#), an [Akerman Senterfitt](#) lawyer in Tampa who is a young lawyer division board member.

"We think it is a very exciting idea," Diamond said. "It benefits the law firm and the resident who gets the opportunity to interact with an experienced attorney. That is so critical to practicing law."

Benefits for firms

The resident at law idea, which is similar to the medical residency concept, can give lone practitioners and small firms more firepower without the process and obligation of hiring an associate, Diamond said.

An associate is generally a recent law school graduate and an entry-level lawyer. Pay for associates varies, depending on the size of the firm, its geographic location and the type of practice, but can be \$100,000 annually or more.

Lile pays Mize \$4,000 a month - \$48,000 a year - which he said is equal to the earnings of new assistant state attorneys and public defenders. When Mize's work for clients is billed, the rate is \$125 an hour. Ten hours a week equals the resident's pay.

"This is an idea that's started floating around in legal circles now," Diamond said. "There is no expectation of permanent employment, and it provides real exposure to the substantive aspects of practicing law. A firm can bill out some of the resident's work so it's profitable."

For Lile, his resident's work has added revenue to the firm that it would not have gotten. The firm has taken on additional client matters it would not have considered before Mize started. Lile requires Mize to keep track of his hours, but does not require him to work a certain number of billable hours.

"I removed the cloud of a billable hour requirement," he said. "I'd rather he just do good work."

Part of the resident's job expectations is participation in Bar activities, which Lile, who is on the Bar's board of governors, believes pays off by encouraging service to the profession.

Concept buy-in

Considering that conventional wisdom says that it takes five years of experience for a lawyer to become an effective advocate, the resident at law concept is a good one, said [Charles Gallagher III](#), managing partner of Gallagher & Associates in St. Petersburg and a former member of the young lawyers division.

"Passing the bar (exam) is no longer enough, but you might get pushback from a lot of new lawyers who want to hang out their shingle right away," he said. "There has got to be something in it for firms, too. I think it's a concept that will take some time to get buy in. We already use law clerks in our practice, but we'd do it."

Law clerks usually are not lawyers, but have legal knowledge and assist lawyers. Pay depends on duties and the size of the firm.

An upside to the resident concept is that law firms contemplating hiring an associate could use a resident and evaluate the possibility of hiring the lawyer in the future as an associate.

"You get an unconditional look at folks rather than hiring them as associates," Gallagher said. "In theory, it's a phenomenal idea. The key is how to do it without going too far."