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4 BigLaw Firms Join Female Attorney 'Returnship' Program

By **Gavin Broady**

Law360, New York (March 30, 2015, 8:36 PM ET) -- BigLaw's first program for women returning to legal careers after an extended hiatus got even bigger on Monday, as Covington & Burling LLP, Goodwin Procter LLP, Pillsbury Winthrop Shaw Pittman LLP and Fox Rothschild LLP announced they will begin offering fellowships.

OnRamp Fellowships offers paid, yearlong grants to women transitioning back into full-time legal careers after taking long breaks, often to raise children or care for relatives. The program has grown rapidly since first launching just over a year ago, and now encompasses 19 law firms that offer more than 100 fellowships in dozens of cities across the U.S.

"There has been a lot of negative press over the years about BigLaw and their lack of desire or ability to innovate," OnRamp founder Caren Ulrich Stacy told Law360 on Monday. "The incredible level of participation by so many firms proves these BigLaw naysayers wrong."

The growing interest in OnRamp is apparent in a recent spike in placements, with seven women scoring fellowships in the first three months of 2015 alone and 20 more candidates currently in the interview process, according to Stacy.

That marks a notable jump over the nine fellowships offered by participating firms in all of 2014. It's also a good sign for the future, as several of those inaugural fellows have already received offers to join their placement firms full-time, Stacy said.

OnRamp has high hopes that growth will continue, with Stacy predicting that the program will place more than 40 women with firms this year and begin efforts to expand into Canada as well as corporate legal departments throughout the U.S.

OnRamp launched in January 2014 with backing from Baker Botts LLP, Cooley LLP, Hogan Lovells, and Sidley Austin LLP. The program's mission is to combat the "leaky pipeline" trend in BigLaw that has seen female representation in top firms continue to shrink despite strong recruitment and retention efforts.

BigLaw ended a four-year decline in female-associate head count last year, and while **women have made modest gains** over recent decades, they still represent only 21 percent of partners overall, according to the National Association for Law Placement.

Modeled on so-called returnship programs offered at companies like Goldman Sachs Group Inc., OnRamp aims to fortify those gains by working with leading firms to offer fellowships to women who have at least three years of professional experience but have been on hiatus for at least two years.

The fellowships provide a \$125,000 stipend, with benefits, for a one-year, full-time contract, and offer opportunities in more than 15 practice areas, including antitrust, finance, intellectual property, mergers and acquisitions, real estate, securities, and tax.

The latest round of expansion adds New Jersey and Boston to the roster of 25-plus cities where OnRamp fellows can practice.

More than 300 women have applied to the program, and one-third of the 16 total fellows selected thus far are attorneys of color, according to Stacy. She notes that those women were away from law for as long as 20 years in some cases, but many spent the time away developing professional skills by teaching law school courses, earning advanced degrees or holding public office.

Law firms have proven receptive to OnRamp's message. Following its initial four-firm launch in January 2014, **the program expanded last September** with the addition of Akerman LLP, Baker Donelson Bearman Caldwell & Berkowitz PC, Blank Rome LLP, Crowell & Moring LLP, Fenwick & West LLP, Fish & Richardson PC, Fried Frank Harris Shriver & Jacobson LLP, Jenner & Block LLP, K&L Gates LLP, Orrick Herrington & Sutcliffe LLP and White & Case LLP.

"The positive reception from law firms for this first-of-its-kind legal 'returnship' program has rocked my world," Stacy said. "When presented with an opportunity to tap a tremendous talent resource — especially one that moves the needle forward from a diversity perspective — law firms are happy to be known as 'disrupters.'"

--Additional reporting by Andrew Strickler. Editing by Edrienne Su.

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