Q&A: Skadden fellowship program helps fund legal services for impoverished Americans

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(July 25, 2025) - The Skadden Fellowship Foundation this year achieved the milestone of funding more than 1,000 fellowships since it was launched in 1988 to commemorate Skadden, Arps, Slate, Meagher & Flom LLP's 40th anniversary.

The nonpartisan, nonprofit program provides two-year fellowships to recent law graduates to pursue public interest law full time and address the civil legal needs of those living in poverty in the U.S.

Westlaw Today asked Skadden Foundation interim executive director Susan Butler Plum about the foundation and its goals and how other firms can follow in Skadden's footsteps.

The following conversation has been edited for brevity and clarity.

Westlaw Today: What led the firm to launch the Skadden Foundation?

Susan Butler Plum: The Skadden Foundation was established in 1988 to commemorate Skadden's 40th anniversary. The program provides two-year fellowships to recent law graduates and judicial clerks to pursue the practice of public interest law on a full-time basis. This unique program was designed to help impoverished individuals access the legal system and address what are often life-altering issues.

The fellowship also provides the opportunity for passionate and driven law graduates to design their dream public interest job and ultimately launch a lifelong career in public service. We are proud that 90% of Skadden Fellows remain working in public interest law after their fellowships conclude.

WT: What are the foundation's goals?

SBP: Our goal is to address unmet civil legal needs of people living in poverty in the U.S. through public interest work. By assisting individuals living in poverty with critical legal issues, Fellows help to make progress toward the goal of making the legal system accessible to everyone.

WT: What are the requirements to apply for a Skadden Fellowship? How many applications do you typically receive for each cycle, and how many do you approve?

SBP: Law students, judicial clerks and recent law school graduates are eligible to apply for a Skadden fellowship in collaboration with an established nonprofit organization. Applicants propose projects that address key issues that individuals living in poverty in the United States face and demonstrate how they are uniquely positioned to lead this project. Fellows lead projects focused on a wide range of legal issues, including disability rights, housing, education, community development, veterans' rights, elder law and domestic violence, among many others. We typically award 28 two-year fellowships per year. We recently welcomed our 37th class.

WT: The Skadden Foundation recently reached the milestone of funding more than 1,000 fellowships. What does this achievement mean?

SBP: This is a significant achievement for the firm and the foundation and reflects a longstanding commitment to public service and social impact. It demonstrates Skadden's enduring investment in the foundation, which has enabled thousands of individuals living in poverty to receive the legal support they need to address their most important issues.

The fellowship has also helped support the success of so many public interest careers, as well as its broader commitment to fostering positive change in the legal profession and the communities it serves.

WT: What are some notable accomplishments that Skadden Fellows have achieved either during their fellowships or in their post fellowship careers?

SBP: In addition to two MacArthur Fellows, Skadden Fellows have gone on to lead Pennsylvania's Office of Children, Youth and Families, act as executive director of New Hampshire Legal Assistance, serve as the labor secretary of California, work as acting labor secretary for President Joe Biden, and serve as a judge for the 9th U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals. A few former Fellows went on to become directors at the agencies where they completed their fellowships.

WT: How does the Skadden Foundation support Fellows while they are working with their nonprofit host organizations and after they complete their fellowship?

SBP: The Skadden Foundation fully supports Fellows throughout their two-year project by providing financial and professional resources. Each Fellow's salary is entirely funded by the foundation through the Skadden partnership.

In addition to financial backing, the foundation delivers continuous guidance and resources at every phase of the fellowship — helping Fellows prepare for their roles, supporting them as they serve and remaining a resource after their term ends. Fellows also receive additional financial support, including help with moving expenses, bar exam costs, loan repayment and funding for professional development opportunities.

After the fellowship, alumni of the program can apply for grants to help them start new public interest projects or pursue academic writing related to their work, ensuring ongoing support as they advance their careers in public service.

Today, former Fellows practice public interest law in 42 states and Washington, D.C.

WT: The foundation offers incubator grants for former Fellows. Tell us about this program.

SBP: In 2011, the Skadden Foundation launched the Flom Incubator Grants (FIGs) program, in memory of Joe Flom, a founding trustee of the fellowship. The purpose of these grants is to provide support to former Skadden Fellows through funding for innovative public interest legal projects and implementation of new initiatives.

To date, 185 FIGs have been awarded. These grants are an example of how the foundation seeks to respond and provide support as the needs of our community of Fellows change.

WT: Does work done by Skadden Fellows intersect with pro bono work performed by the firm?

SBP: After Fellows are chosen, Skadden frequently collaborates with them as a pro bono partner, both during and after their fellowships. This partnership extends beyond the two-year period of their projects, as many Fellows who go on to establish their own public interest organizations receive ongoing support from the firm through pro bono legal services.

The foundation's incubator grants, combined with the firm's pro bono assistance, have helped at least two dozen Fellows to successfully launch new public interest initiatives. This ongoing relationship highlights the meaningful intersection between the work of Skadden Fellows and the firm's commitment to pro bono service.

WT: The world is certainly different now than when the Skadden Foundation was launched in 1988. How has the foundation evolved in those years?

SBP: As the needs of our clients, Fellows and host organizations evolve, we continuously seek ways to provide support that aligns with those shifting needs. This has led to the launch of many new programs over the years.

We created the Fellows to Fellows (F2F) program to connect former Fellows by providing training on their areas of expertise to current Fellows and those in their first decade of practice. Last year, current and recent Fellows practicing across 27 states attended at least one of our F2F trainings.

Most recently, we announced our On-site Learning Initiative. This initiative enables current Fellows to visit, learn from and build a connection with a leading former Fellow whose work is relevant to the current Fellow's area of practice. Our goal is to offer support and programs that help Fellows excel in their careers long beyond their fellowships.

WT: If another firm were to follow in Skadden's footsteps, what advice would you have for them?

SBP: In 1988, there were no law firms offering any type of public interest fellowship. That told us there was both a need and an opportunity to be helpful in this space. My recommendation to firms and companies looking to create fellowships or contribute to the public interest sector is to first identify areas where services are lacking and then speak with all the constituents in that space to understand the most impactful ways to address gaps in support.

By John Fitzgerald
Susan Butler Plum is the interim executive director of the Skadden Fellowship Foundation, a nonpartisan nonprofit associated with **Skadden, Arps, Slate, Meagher & Flom LLP** that provides two-year fellowships to recent law graduates to pursue public interest law full time.


Susan Butler Plum