

## At Sidebar

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KIM KORATSKY

# Now I Are One

FOR YEARS I HAVE heard the joke (it seems, normally about engineers) that goes something to this effect: “Last week I couldn’t spell \_\_\_\_\_. Now I are one.” Members of the editorial board of *The Federal Lawyer* rotate responsibility for writing this column, and one of my fellow board members asked to swap with me for this issue, the theme

of which set out to focus on government lawyers. In January, I left private practice to become the senior assistant county attorney for Shelby County, Tenn. It’s funny; although this issue no longer strictly focuses on government lawyers, “now I are one” (government lawyer, that is).

Many graduates from my law school class have become government lawyers. Some began in government jobs, while others moved into government jobs after working for a time in the private sector. I think it is fair to say that, based on the financial side of government jobs, we are working in the public sector because we want to; we certainly did not take a government job for the large salary. Generally, the benefits are above average, but current budget crunching has diminished that perk a bit. Although government lawyers do not enjoy the security they once did, I believe we are more secure than many in private practice are, especially in today’s economy. Another side benefit of government work is that we do not have to chase billable hours. Even though we do not typically deal with billable hours like private practice lawyers do, adequate business is normally not a problem. For example, I am an employment lawyer for the most populous county in Tennessee—a county that has more than 6,000 employees. So staying busy is not an issue for me.

As my brief overview indicates, the transition can go a number of ways. Typically, it is probably easier to move from private practice to government service after one has already honed his or her lawyering skills in private practice. But, depending on the practice area, moving the other way may be just as easy. For example, a military lawyer, prosecutor, or public defender can gain more trial experience in several years than many private sector lawyers get in their entire career. So, depending on the opening, a law firm might be quite interested in a seasoned, mid-level government lawyer.

Why make the change? In talking to lawyers in government positions, I hear a variety of reasons why

they made the choice. For some, it was to get away from the grind of billable hours. For others, it was the opportunity to give back through public service. Some prosecutors say that they signed on in order to right wrongs and “put away bad guys.” Similarly, public defenders also tell me that they are looking to right wrongs, while protecting the rights of the accused. I have a friend in Florida who recently made the transition from private practice to government work and says the reason for doing so was twofold: to be in public service and to give her control over her hours and more time with her family—in short, her decision was based on quality of life. She also made an interesting comment, saying that she had wanted to be in public service for some time but was trying to wait for the right time financially. She finally decided that, if she waited until she could afford it, she would never move into government work. After about a year in her new job, she says she is doing fine and any financial downside has been more than made up for by the improvement in the quality of her life.

What about me? Prior to law school, I worked in several public service positions and enjoyed government work. After law school, I jumped right in to private practice, concentrating on employment law, and stayed there for 13 years. Then I got the opportunity to work for the government. Like my prior experience, I have found that I enjoy that environment. Despite the jokes I hear about government employees, by and large, government workers are conscientious and care about doing a good job.

As a property tax lawyer told me not long ago, “We’re here because we want to do the right thing.” I think he put it well, because, to me, doing the right thing goes hand in hand with being a lawyer. Admittedly, six months into my government job I am still on my honeymoon, but I am enjoying myself. Do I recommend making the move? I can only give a standard lawyer’s answer: It depends. If you are interested in public service and want to give back to the community, it may be perfect for you. Possibly, you could find a part-time government opportunity to see if you like the work. Give it some thought and maybe you will be able to say, “Now I are one” too. **TFL**

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*Kim Koratsky is the senior assistant county attorney for Shelby County, Tenn. He was previously a partner in the Memphis, Tenn., office of Wyatt, Tarrant & Combs LLP. He is a member of the editorial board of The Federal Lawyer.*