

Dear Pat,

I am a practicing attorney in Albuquerque. I recently found out that I am pregnant. I am planning to take family leave after my baby is born. What preparations should I be making at my firm in anticipation of my leave?

*Signed,
Expecting, Esq.*

Dear Expecting, Esq.,

Congratulations on your exciting news! Balancing the practice of law, your pregnancy, and family can be rewarding and done successfully with advance planning. I recently spoke with Liz and Patty, both attorneys and mothers of young children, for advice in preparing for maternity leave. Liz and Patty informed me that it is important to communicate to your firm and colleagues early in your pregnancy that you are committed to both your family and your career. Below is a list of useful tips to help you prepare for your family leave and your new life as a working mom.

- Understand your leave policy. First, determine how much leave you can take and which policies and state and/or federal regulations apply to your situation. The Family and Medical Leave Act (FMLA) is a federal law that covers both men and women in companies with fifty or more employees by providing up to twelve weeks off from work to care for a newborn or adopted baby. A major drawback to FMLA is that the leave is unpaid. Firms operate differently regarding family leave so be sure to understand your firm's family leave policy. Research your employee benefits, especially health insurance coverage, and whether your firm offers paid or unpaid maternity leave. Your pregnancy may qualify as a temporary disability so find out whether your firm has short-term disability insurance. Liz was able to take twelve weeks of maternity leave by combining her annual and sick leave. Ask your human resources department for all paperwork you may need to submit. Patty noted that advance planning with human resources and her boss about her maternity leave resulted in a smooth transition.

- Personally discuss your pregnancy with your boss instead of allowing your boss to find out about your pregnancy through office gossip. When announcing your pregnancy, schedule an appointment so you will be able to arrive prepared for the ensuing discussion. Tell your boss when you are due to give birth, discuss the options you researched for your maternity leave and communicate your intent to return to work after your maternity leave. You may also consider having a draft of your proposed maternity leave request for your boss to review at this meeting. If you work for an employer that is not covered by FMLA and you were not able to determine what leave may be available to you, this meeting is a great opportunity to ask your employer about his or her expectations regarding your leave.

- Keep in mind that not too long ago, it was common for a female attorney to take only a few weeks of maternity leave after the birth of her child. Although this may sound absurd to you, many female attorneys experienced pressure to return to work as soon as possible so as not to jeopardize their standing with the firm. Luckily, law firms and employers in general have recognized the important need for a woman to take time off from work to properly recover from childbirth and to care for her newborn baby.

- Plan for medical appointments. During your pregnancy, you typically have at least one medical appointment each month, with visits to your doctor increasing to a weekly basis during the final weeks before you deliver. Take these appointments into consideration when you plan your leave from work. Fulfill work commitments and avoid depleting any accumulated leave by working through your lunch hour or working an hour earlier or later on the days you have scheduled doctor appointments. As you plan for your leave, organize your paperwork in a folder and keep copies of everything, including forms you submit to your employer.

- Be flexible. While Patty planned to work until her due date, her first baby arrived almost a week early. Even though Liz's first baby was two weeks late, she had to begin her maternity leave early due to an unforeseen medical condition. Ask your physician to document special medical conditions. Be flexible, and keep your family leave start date open in case your baby arrives early or late.

- Ease the transition. If someone will be handling your cases while you are on leave, write memos in the case files regarding the procedural history of the case and upcoming events. The memos should also include client contact information and anything else that will help ensure a smooth transition while you are away. Notify your clients that another attorney in the firm will be covering your cases while you are on maternity leave. When discussing this with your clients, assure them that

- the other attorney will be fully briefed on the case and will be available to act in your absence. Your firm will greatly appreciate your initiative in preparing your clients and training other attorneys in advance of your leave. Plan ahead and complete any memos or case notes well in advance of your due date. Liz and Patty know of several women who had their babies up to ten weeks early.
- Plan for child care. It is never too early to start planning for child care. Many of the top child care providers in Albuquerque can have waiting lists of up to one year. Begin your search by listing important criteria such as how many hours a week will you need child care, what area of the city would be most convenient, whether you prefer group or one-on-one care, and your budget. Your answers to these questions may change over the course of your pregnancy, but it is important to explore all possibilities to ensure that you find the best fit for you and your baby. Ask other working moms how they handle child care; they often have some of the best referrals or alternative ideas. The Children, Youth and Families Department Web site (www.newmexicokids.org) is a helpful resource that includes a parent's guide for selecting quality child care and a database of child care centers and providers that is searchable by region.

I hope that the foregoing information helps you plan a successful maternity leave. In my next column, look for additional advice regarding returning to work after taking family leave and helpful hints for working moms.

*Sincerely,
Pat*