

Wilmer Assists Mayors, Police Chiefs in Calling for Police Reforms

The firm's pro bono work for the conference is one of the most prominent examples of a big firm seeking to take a more active role in racial justice issues.

By Dylan Jackson
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The U.S. Conference of Mayors has tapped Wilmer Cutler Pickering Hale and Dorr to help put together a list of reforms and recommendations aimed at building trust between police departments and their communities while rooting out racist policing practices.

Wilmer's work for the conference is one of the most prominent examples of a big firm seeking to take a more active role in addressing racial justice issues in the wake of the police killings of George Floyd, Breonna Taylor and others.

On Thursday, the conference's working group on police and racial justice, chaired by the mayors and police chiefs of Chicago, Tampa, Baltimore and other cities, recommended a slate of reforms to its 1,400 member cities. The nonbinding recommendations include increasing funding for social services, requiring officers to report all uses of force and removing police union impediments to officer investigations.

Wilmer first got involved in June, when the law firm contacted Chicago Mayor Lori Lightfoot, who chairs the working conference's group, shortly after it was convened to study proposals for police reform.

In the seven months between the initial outreach and the report's publication, about 45 Wilmer



Photo by Diego Radzinschi/ALM

Thousands march in Washington, D.C., protesting police brutality and the killing of George Floyd in Minnesota at the hands of local police, on June 6, 2020.

attorneys and staff have worked on the effort and put in nearly \$1.6 million of hours — all pro bono.

“We worked on a very tight time frame to get to where we are given the urgency of the matter. This wasn't something anybody wanted to take months or years,” said litigation partner Brent Gurney, a lead partner on the report. “We went to the mayors because they have the power to do things. They're on the front lines. They don't have the luxury of endless debate and have the power to make changes immediately on many, many issues.”

Wilmer, for its part, has significant experience in this arena. The lead partners include Jamie

Gorelick, Gurney and Debo Adegbile. Gorelick was the deputy attorney general in the Clinton administration when Congress gave the Justice Department the power to conduct investigations into municipal police departments. Adegbile is a commissioner for the U.S. Civil Rights Commission. Gurney is a former assistant U.S. attorney.

The firm also has more direct experience, having guided the cities of Baltimore and Chicago when the DOJ investigated each city's police departments after the police killings of Laquan McDonald and Freddie Gray in 2014 and 2015, respectively.

In both cases, the Justice Department found widespread discriminatory policing practices among the police departments. The DOJ subsequently issued consent decrees and appointed an independent monitor to oversee city compliance. But a recent report found that Chicago missed 70% of the decree's deadlines in its first year.

Going forward, Gurney said the firm will continue to work with the mayors as they hold panel discussions and ongoing meetings among the working group.

"The idea is not to drop another report on the cities and walk away, but to give practical advice and resources so they can make these changes on the local level," Gurney said.

In the wake of the police killings, law firms across the U.S. have committed resources to combat racism

both in the legal community and in the country writ large. More than 240 law firms have joined the Law Firm Anti-Racism Alliance, or LFAA, a coordinating body of law firms aiming to address systemic racism with members such as Skadden, Arps, Slate, Meagher & Flom; Akin Gump Strauss Hauer & Feld and Wilmer.

In June, the ACLU of Louisiana launched the project, called "Justice Lab: Putting Racist Policing on Trial," with the goal of getting 100 private law firms and 25 law clinics to file up to 1,000 civil lawsuits alleging racist police actions. So far, roughly 40 firms have become involved in the project.

In addition to its work with the LFAA, Wilmer has also pledged \$250,000 to groups working on police reform efforts and will select two fellows annually to work at a civil rights organization. The firm also established a "pro bono client initiative" focused on police reform and says it will provide legal help to arrested protesters.

"Our firm has made a huge commitment to police reform and racial justice issues that go well beyond this project," Gurney said. "We needed to be heard on these issues and step up as a matter of firm responsibility."

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