

How Wilmer Built a Winner With Help From the 'Entire Firm Community'

Wilmer Cutler Pickering Hale and Dorr has brought big names into the fold and represented clients on high-profile matters, but its success shows that the whole is even greater than the sum of the parts.

By Dylan Jackson
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Robert Novick believes what makes his firm great is not any one practice group, or attorney, or client or matter. Novick, who leads Wilmer Cutler Pickering Hale and Dorr alongside Susan Murley, breaks with current orthodoxy: Whereas the prevailing strategy in Big Law is to be the best at one or two things, Novick takes pride in what he sees as a well-rounded, complete firm—one that was recently named **The American Lawyer's 2020 Law Firm of the Year**.

"It's the contribution from the entire firm community," Novick said when asked why his firm deserved the recognition. "What I mean by that is our lawyers are strong. They get called for and take on really interesting high-profile work. Our staff is incredible, they are innovative and they deliver."

Over the past two years, Wilmer has seen the addition—and return—of some big names including, Robert Mueller III, whose team returned to the firm after his high-profile stint as special counsel investigating Russian interference into the 2016 election. Other notable additions included former assistant U.S. attorney for Colorado Gina Rodriguez, former U.S. attorney for Colorado John Walsh, former Durie Tangri intellectual property



Wilmer's Washington, D.C., offices at 1875 Pennsylvania Avenue, NW. Photo: Diego M. Radzinski / ALM

litigator Sonal Mehta and top environmental attorney Peggy Otum.

The firm's case list since January 2019 is similarly star-studded. Wilmer was counsel to Harvard in its landmark racial discrimination case, which the school beat back in what a Boston Globe columnist called "a defiant defense of affirmative action in higher education."

The firm was also counsel to the city of Chicago in its litigation against the Trump administration over its "sanctuary city" status. In April 2020, the U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals for the Seventh Circuit ruled that President Donald Trump's threat to deny grant money over the

city's sanctuary city policy violated the separation of powers doctrine.

Last February, Wilmer was among the first law firms to set up a coronavirus task force. The group was led by Alejandro Mayorkas, who was **recently tapped** by the Biden administration to head up the U.S. Department of Homeland Security.

But, again, Novick said his firm's success lies not just in the attorneys it hires or its matters. He notes that Wilmer has made The American Lawyer's A-List—which takes into consideration not just revenues, but pro bono work and attorney satisfaction—for 17 years, the last five consecutive years in the top 10. In the early months of the pandemic, Wilmer, like many firms, opted to shift the burden of the crisis onto partners, not associates or staff. In fact, the firm's head count swelled more than 5% last year, while attorney head count across the industry **shrunk** by an average of 1.6%.

"We're always very pleased when we're on the A-List, because it speaks to economic diversity and pro bono work. It's another way to amplify what we're proud of as an institution. I think we do a lot of things very well," Novick said.

In the summer, as the streets filled with protesters outraged at George Floyd's killing at the hands of a Minnesota police officer, Wilmer went to work pro bono. The U.S. Conference of Mayors **tapped**

the firm 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.

In the seven months between the initial outreach and the report's publication, about 45 Wilmer attorneys and staff have worked on the effort and put in nearly \$1.6 million worth of hours—all pro bono.

The firm also got heavily involved in preelection voting rights litigation. A number of firm attorneys contributed an "enormous" amount of time pro bono to research and litigate issues related to mail-in balloting, including ballot drop box rules in Pennsylvania. Novick said the firm's work in this area led to a glut of paid work in post-election litigation. According to the Federal Elections Commission, Wilmer billed the Democratic National Committee \$3.2 million between Nov. 4 and Dec. 31, 2020. This pipeline from relationship building through pro bono work to eventual billing is something Novick is proud of.

"We built new business and new relationships," Novick said. "I think it is important to put out there because it feeds into where we sit today."

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