GIBSON DUNN

Combating Antisemitism, Big Law Looks to ‘Meet the Moment’ With Pro Bono Work

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While some pro bono matters are seeing a tepid response from Big Law during the second Trump administration, large law firms have stepped up in 2025 to address the surge in demand to help Jewish organizations combat antisemitism. Several nonprofit organizations have reported to Law.com that they are seeing an increasing need to help Jewish individuals and groups "fight back against the rising tide of antisemitism.” The nonprofits also say they are grateful for the increasing supply of lawyers and big firms to help meet that need on a pro bono basis. The surge in need — and available support from firms — comes as the Trump administration has made combating antisemitism a prime focus in its settlements with nine big law firms, totaling $940 million in pro bono work. (Leaders of several of the firms settling with Trump have emphasized in internal memos that they wouldn’t have to undergo significant changes to their current practices, noting that they already do work that falls under their pro bono commitments.) The president has also cited antisemitism claims in his battle against several universities, leading to more public focus on the issue. Meanwhile, law firms are being more cautious about selecting other kinds of pro bono matters, such as immigration and asylum cases, with some firms backing out of politically sensitive pro bono commitments, Law.com has reported. Some parts of Big Law have also been criticized for contributing to an "environment of Islamophobia and anti-Arab sentiment" by some bar associations, including for failing to put part of the anti-hate focus on Islamophobia. In the pro bono arena to combat antisemitism, law firms are working with several nonprofits to file federal civil rights complaints and staff hotlines, among other litigation and advisory work. James Pasch, vice president of litigation at the Anti-Defamation League, which works with dozens of law firms, said that requests for pro bono legal assistance have “skyrocketed” as they field incidents of assault, harassment, vandalism at K-12 schools, college campuses and places of business and employment. “Law firms, to their credit, have really stepped up to meet the moment, at a pro bono level,” said Pasch. “Whether that’s Gibson Dunn partnering with ADL, with Hillel International… in the formation of a call line to provide pro bono legal assistance to college students experiencing antisemitism, whether that's cases that we have brought forward against extremist organizations with Paul Weiss and Jones Day, or major settlements that have been reached against educational institutions, that we filed alongside Covington or Mayor Brown, there have been large firms who have stepped up in this moment of need to fight back against the rising tide of antisemitism.” Gibson, Dunn & Crutcher partnered with ADL, Hillel International and the Louis Brandeis Center for Human Rights Under Law to launch the Campus Antisemitism Legal Line back in November 2023, a free legal protection helpline for university students. More than 100 attorneys at Gibson Dunn have worked on the helpline since then, with more than 6,000 hours of work logged. At least 40 other law firms and hundreds of individual practitioners have worked on the helpline too. “When we focus on pro bono, we focus on what are the urgent matters of the day, and have, historically as a firm for decades now, focused on what are the most pressing public issues that require legal representation, and so anti-semitism is not a relic of the past. It's a rising threat in the present,” said Gibson Dunn partner Orin Snyder. In addition, last February, Covington & Burling; Dechert; Akin Gump

Related People

Orin Snyder

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Strauss Hauer & Feld; and Davis Polk & Wardwell, along with Louis D. Brandeis Center for Human Rights Under Law, ADL, and StandWithUs, launched a similar helpline to provide pro bono legal assistance to parents whose children are experiencing antisemitism in K-12 schools in California, Massachusetts and New York. The helplines have spurred a number of cases, which law firms have been involved in as well. A pro bono team at Mayer Brown, alongside ADL and the Louis Brandeis Center for Human Rights Under Law, filed a brief in late June with the Department of Education's Office for Civil Rights, alleging that officials at the Concord-Carlisle Regional School District in Massachusetts failed to protect Jewish students from "antisemitic harassment, discrimination, and retaliation," according to a press release. The case was referred through the K-12 helpline. Matthew Ingber, partner and member of Mayer Brown's management committee, said that they've seen more need in this area in recent years. "We have a number of different pillars of our pro bono program…but certainly combating hate, combating racism, pushing back against social injustices, and I'd say more recently, in the last few years, combating antisemitism," said Ingber. "Unfortunately, there's just been more of a need over the last few years than there was previously." **More Interest From Law Firms** Yael Lerman, director of StandWithUs Legal Department, said the group was "grateful to have received more pro bono assistance and interest from attorneys/law firms (and law students) in recent months, due to our increased efforts to make the legal community aware that they can partner with nonprofits like StandWithUs to combat antisemitism using their legal expertise." Lerman added it was "a continuation in a steady rise of pro bono help that we have seen consistently from the legal community" since the attacks on Israel in October 2023. Currently, there are more than 150 lawyers in the StandWithUs pro-bono network, Lerman said. Gerard Filitti, senior counsel at The Lawfare Project, echoed that there has been a "growing awareness within the legal field that this is a substantial issue that needs to be addressed" since Oct. 7, 2023. "We are in a fortunate place that the administration is highlighting antisemitism as a priority, and this is helping us get attention, more so on Capitol Hill, perhaps more so within the administration for executive action," Filitti added. "But in the legal space, lawyers who we work with understand that this is fundamentally a civil rights issue, and as such, it is something that requires attention, no matter who is in the White House." Law firms' pro bono work for these organizations can pull in attorneys from across practice areas, including litigation, labor and employment, corporate and higher education. Filitti said they provide the "full service of advocacy" for the Jewish community in addition to their litigation work. For instance, the Lawfare Project and attorneys at Alston & Bird who are serving as co-counsel attended the House Committee on Education and the Workforce's hearing on antisemitism in higher education earlier this month to advocate on behalf of members of the City University of New York. It follows an antisemitism lawsuit filed by the Lawfare Project and Alston & Bird against CUNY Hunter College last December.

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