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A look at COVID response in Pittsburgh law firms

By Zandy Dudiak

With the COVID-19 surge created by the omicron variant waning, it is a perfect time to reflect on what local law firms have been through in the two years since Gov. Tom Wolf ordered a shutdown of businesses and courts on March 19, 2020.

The *Lawyers Journal* talked with three representatives from different size firms with offices in downtown Pittsburgh to get a perspective on where they've been the last two years and how the pandemic has changed how they operate today.

Those interviewed are Sandra Fantini, legal administrator, Papernick & Gefsky, a small firm with eight attorneys; Mark Hill, COO, Houston Harbaugh P.C., a medium-sized firm with 37 lawyers; and Kathy Sullivan, CHRO, Clark Hill, a large international commercial law firm, with 27 offices and 1,200 colleagues. *This article is the first in a three-part series.*

"Everybody's impacted," Sullivan noted. "But it's not a one-size-fits-all crisis."

LJ: How did your firm prepare as COVID became a pandemic?

Kathy: It's very vivid in my memory. By mid-February 2020, there was a lot more news about the spread of COVID-19. Clark Hill formed an internal group of information technology (IT), human resources (HR) and general operations staff to start preparing and considering what to do if a shutdown occurred. We also considered what to do if there was a major infection rate and the staff couldn't be in the office. When the shutdown came on March 19, 2020 in Pennsylvania, our Pittsburgh and Philadelphia offices closed first. Because we have offices in many states, the orders were coming in waves and were different state to state. We had firm-wide guidelines and then adapted, based on any state/local orders.

Mark: In March of 2020 we had been following what was taking place overseas and locally and had been discussing the possibility of a potential shutdown. Once Governor Wolf issued the shutdown, the firm's executive management team put a policy in place that first ensured the safety and well-being of all members of the firm and put the firm in a position to remain open for business. Part of this plan was to appoint a Pandemic Safety Officer (PSO). The PSO's responsibility is to address issues concerning and managing compliance with Houston Harbaugh's COVID-19 mitigation measures, and to make recommendations and determinations regarding adjustments to policies and procedures. We also feel that communication to the members of the firm was paramount. To accomplish this, we held regular town hall meetings to

provide pertinent information to the attorneys and staff. This forum also allowed questions to be asked of management.

Sandra: It didn't take us down like it did others. We were already organized and didn't have to do much to adapt. In February 2020, we were paying attention to things. We ordered laptops, just in case, and updated our systems to prepare for working remotely.

LJ: What changes did your firm have to make in the beginning of COVID and what changes have you kept?

Kathy: We formed a Critical Response Team (CRT) across our firm, consisting of me, the CEO, chairman of the board, firm employment counsel, COO, CMO, CIO and senior director of operations. The CRT met twice a week and met regularly with the partners in charge of each of our offices. Communication to our offices was critically important. As cases increased, we went remote but kept a core group reporting to each office. We conducted quarterly town hall meetings via Zoom, which we ramped up early on. People needed to know we "had this." All the uncertainty was causing anxiety.

Mark: When it appeared that the pandemic would go on longer than originally anticipated, we knew that we needed to create an environment that made working from home more efficient. To help with this, we sent out a survey to the firm's attorneys and staff members working from home. The survey was designed to help us determine what was needed to make working from home more comfortable and efficient. Based on their responses, we provided items like printers and larger monitors. We now have embraced the working remote environment for the timekeepers and I don't see that changing anytime soon. We also provided PPE supplies throughout the firm and to each staff member; we intend to continue doing this moving forward.

Sandra: When the governor shut us down that Friday (March 19, 2020), everyone stayed home. We had a partner meeting that Monday, after the shutdown, to determine the firm's next steps and how we would implement them. Within a day, we were up and running. By Tuesday, the legal assistants and paralegals had access to their desktops and files. Initially, everyone was working remotely, but for those who needed to stop in the office, we had masks available for everyone. We continue to have a supply of PPE available to all. Our masking rule is still in place when you enter the office.

LJ: Were interior changes made?

Kathy: In Pittsburgh, we made changes following safety protocols. We reduced the capacity in our conference room. We reduced the population in our office to maintain a 6-foot distance between workstations.

Mark: We didn't make many drastic changes. We did work with a space planning professional to help us with our planning. The space planner was able to help us to determine adequate social distancing between workstations, conference room seating, our breakroom and in other common areas. We also added Plexiglass panels to the legal assistant workstations to provide additional protection. And, once we looked at the space plan, we got creative and figured out how to get most of the support staff into a room with a door. In the beginning of the pandemic, this was important because there was no vaccine available. Like other businesses at that time, we required everyone to wear a mask when in the office. By creating individual offices for the staff, they were able to remove their masks when behind closed doors, which was most of their day.

Sandra: In our office landscape, everyone has an office with a door, but in our common areas, we keep socially distanced and everyone wears a mask. We have an electronic door with a basket for deliveries. The delivery person just rings the doorbell and leaves the package unless it requires a signature.

LJ: Are your staff members working in-person or remotely?

Kathy: In Pittsburgh, our staff is predominately back in the office. Many lawyers are continuing to work remotely. We have embraced remote work and when we come back to the office, remote work and hybrid schedules are permitted based on the position's ability to be performed remotely. Requests must be approved by HR with formalized "rules of engagement." The employee and supervisor sign the agreement, which touches on duties and responsibilities. Because of the omicron surge, we've planned to delay bringing everyone back until Feb. 28.

Mark: The firm's attorneys and paralegals are permitted to work remotely and come into the office as needed. Our support staff, including legal assistants, accounting, IT and management, work in the office on a regular basis with limited exceptions.

Sandra: We brought everyone back when the governor said we could. We realize that there are many changes that have occurred due to COVID-19 and have been flexible with all attorneys and staff in our office to permit remote work when necessary. ■

The second article in this series will be published in the March 25, 2022 edition.