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LAW PRACTICE MANAGEMENT

Part 2: A look at COVID response in Pittsburgh law firms

By Zandy Dudiak

Masks, vaccinations and social distancing have become part of the “new normal” for local law firms. Even the way lawyers, paralegals and the legal staff meet with clients has changed.

The *Lawyers Journal* talked with three representatives from different size firms with offices in downtown Pittsburgh to get a perspective on what COVID-19 safety policies their firms have put in place since Gov. Tom Wolf ordered a shutdown of businesses and courts on March 19, 2020 and how the pandemic has changed the way they meet with clients 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 second in a three-part series.*

LJ: What are your firm’s COVID-19 policies?

Kathy: We still require masks in common spaces, but not in individual offices. We limit in-person meetings. We follow CDC guidance and state guidance since we have offices across the U.S. – and they are all different. Because of that, requirements have varied. For instance, our Scottsdale office never went remote.

Mark: Anyone fully vaccinated is not required to wear a mask in our offices. If you are unvaccinated, then you are required to wear a mask in any common areas, but you may remove it when you get to your office. We also follow social distancing recommendations and any exposure to COVID-19 must be reported to the Pandemic Safety Officer. In advance of a client meeting at the office, attorneys are required to go over the firm’s COVID-19 protocol with their clients.

Sandra: We still require masking and social distancing in common areas. The mask policy has been in place from the time we came back into the office to work. We do not have a vaccine policy and follow CDC guidelines for those who have been exposed or have symptoms.

LJ: Have clients been compliant with those protocols?

Kathy: We’ve had no issues with clients pushing back. It’s about everyone’s safety.

Mark: We have had no issues with clients adhering to the firm’s COVID-19 policies.

Sandra: We have had no issues with clients. We continue to not have outside people, including clients, into our offices.

LJ: Have you met or are you meeting with clients differently?

Kathy: We take our lead from our clients. Clients have embraced Zoom, and in instances where meetings must be in person, we follow our safety protocols of masks and social distancing.

Mark: We still have in-person meetings, but those are not as frequent. The trend for both clients and the attorneys has been to meet via Zoom or a conference call. I believe the clients like the remote meetings as there are some cost savings regarding the travel costs associated with in-person meetings. I believe the attorneys like remote meetings as it lets them be more efficient with their time.

Sandra: The bulk of our business is real estate related. Since the pandemic shutdown, we have been going to our clients or electronically communicating with them. For our residential practice during shutdown, we got creative and would meet with only the buyer or seller at the property without realtors, meet on porches, at front doors or at a table set up in the garage. We made sure to wear gloves and masks. After the shutdown, we had some in-person meetings at the lower-level tables in Oxford Centre. Our clients have adapted to it and appreciated our safety precautions. We made everyone comfortable.

LJ: Are you still in the same location as before the pandemic?

Kathy: Our Pittsburgh office remains in Oxford Center. We did have a few offices in other states up for lease renewal and we approached those differently. Two of our West Coast offices moved to new locations during the pandemic and were designed for hybrid work. We are using a “hoteling” concept there, where office space is shared as some work remotely on certain days.

Mark: Yes. We remain in Three Gateway Center.

Sandra: Yes. We are still in Oxford Centre. ■

The third article in this series will be published in the April 8, 2022 edition.