

2023-2024

Pro Bono Report



A letter from Brent Landau

Dear Friends,

Before I joined the Public Interest Law Center as Executive Director earlier this year, I had the privilege of serving as pro bono co-counsel alongside the Law Center's talented staff. While I was already familiar with the Law Center's groundbreaking work, my incredibly rewarding pro bono experience provided a first-hand view of how the Law Center uses litigation and other high-impact strategies to make a real difference in the lives of people in our communities.



Southwest Philadelphia is plagued by a concentration of auto body repair shops. Despite inspections, violations, and fines imposed by the Philadelphia Department of Licenses and Inspections, enforcement remains elusive. The result is a community where toxic fumes, deafening noises caused by welding and dismantling vehicles, cars in various states of disrepair blocking streets and sidewalks, and hazardous fire conditions are the norm.

The Law Center and my former law firm, Hausfeld, represented Ramona and Rodney Bell and Marceline Dix, whose homes shared an alley with a sprawling auto body business in the middle of their dense Southwest Philadelphia residential neighborhood. For years, operations at the property disrupted their daily lives and the lives of their neighbors.

The shop littered their neighborhood, their shared alley, and even their backyards with junked cars, trash, tires, oil cans, and debris. Noxious fumes and noise routinely intruded into their homes. Illegally dumped parked cars lined the surrounding streets and blocked shared access in the alley. And even though these particular property owners had been cited for 58 code violations since 2007, disruptive, unsafe, and illegal practices inevitably resumed.

In 2023, we sued the property owners and White's Autobody in the Philadelphia Court of Common Pleas, alleging that the shop created a private and public nuisance and trespassed on our clients' properties. As our client Ms. Dix said: "This lawsuit is a last resort: we've spoken with the auto body shop employees and property owners, and with the City, countless times. I brought this case because it is unacceptable for businesses to endanger my children's health by flouting the law."



Soon after we filed our lawsuit, the auto body shop was shut down, providing some relief to these neighbors. But the larger problem persists: a 2019 WHYY investigation found that more than 100 auto-related businesses in Southwest Philadelphia had been granted zoning variances to operate on lots that are not intended for industrial use. Dozens of them share blocks with homes and schools. Much work remains to be done, and the Law Center stands ready to fight for people in low-income, historically disinvested communities who deserve to live in sustainable and equitable neighborhoods.

Working pro bono on behalf of the Bells and Ms. Dix was a meaningful experience for the entire Hausfeld team, which also included Katie Beran, James Gotz, Angel Dorsey, Kenya McCune, Tim Kelley, Sara Trouillot, and Halli Spraggins. As you will learn from reading this report, the other lawyers highlighted here found their own work with the Law Center just as impactful. We are so grateful for the contributions that all of our pro bono partners have made, and look forward to further work together as we advance the civil, social, and economic rights of communities in our region facing discrimination, poverty, and inequality. We cannot do it without your help.

Brent W Landau

Brent W. Landau
Executive Director

Pro Bono Partner Spotlight: Jasmeet Ahuja

Case: Crawford et al. v. Commonwealth of Pennsylvania

Filed: October 7, 2020

Firm Name: Hogan Lovells

Brief review of case: Amid a surge in gun violence, the City of Philadelphia, along with residents who have lost family members to gun violence and CeaseFirePA, represented by the Law Center and Hogan Lovells, are challenging Pennsylvania's firearm preemption laws. These laws prohibit local governments from implementing their own gun safety measures. We argue that preemption hinders municipalities from enacting life-saving policies, while the commonwealth of Pennsylvania fails to implement its own comprehensive gun safety regulations. Gun violence, especially affecting marginalized communities, has escalated dramatically, with Philadelphia seeing a significant rise in shooting incidents and victims. The Pennsylvania Supreme Court heard oral argument in the case, led by Ms. Ahuja, in September 2023.

What motivated you to take on this case aimed at reducing gun violence? Can you share any personal or professional experiences that influenced your decision to get involved?

I lived in Philadelphia for many years with my young children. Sadly, I saw firsthand the impact that gun violence has on our city. How the fear of gun violence can put you on edge in even the most mundane of situations – like getting a coffee or visiting the park with your children. It's unfair, and it need not be this way. Our team brought this case to give a voice to those who have been disproportionately impacted by gun violence and whose voices have been ignored for decades.



I had previously represented the City of Philadelphia in a separate case called City of Philadelphia v. Armstrong. It was the first enforcement action that the City had ever brought under an ordinance enacted in part to target straw purchasers of handguns. Based on my work with the City and the Public Interest Law Center in Armstrong, I joined efforts in Crawford.

What role did you play in the case, and what were your primary responsibilities throughout the process?

The case is the brainchild of many, including the Public Interest Law Center, CeaseFirePA, the City of Philadelphia, and my firm Hogan Lovells. I was brought on when we were appealing the Commonwealth Court's decision to the Supreme Court. I had the distinct privilege of arguing our case to Pennsylvania's highest court.

Can you describe how you and the team provided support and assistance to the families affected by gun violence throughout the legal process? What specific measures did you take to address their unique needs and challenges during such a tough time?

Gun violence claims the lives of so many, so abruptly, and harms our communities in ways that have lasting intergenerational impacts. I had the privilege of working with Stanley Crawford, the lead petitioner, and the Public Interest Law Center and CeaseFirePA provided day-to-day support to the many petitioners who joined us in fighting for their rights.



Stanley Crawford with a photo of his son, William Aboaje Samir Crawford. William was shot and killed on September 8, 2018.

Considering the complexities of gun violence prevention, what were some of the key challenges you encountered while preparing and presenting your case?

Finding the right legal theory and deciding whether a particular case is the right case, at the right time, is always challenging. But an overarching challenge for us is the fact that, unfortunately, it's human nature to minimize issues that don't impact you directly. When you're not seeing the everyday effects of something, they are sometimes hard to comprehend. By the same measure, when you continually hear the same thing repeatedly, you become numb to it. Both challenges are difficult to overcome: most Pennsylvanians don't live in a constant fear from gun violence and yet gun violence in Philadelphia dominates the news cycle. This double conundrum is one of the reasons that the work CeaseFirePA and the Public Interest Law Center are doing, both in the courtroom and in our communities, is so critically important. They bring the voices and stories to the forefront—so they can't be ignored any longer.

Other Pro Bono Partners on the Case:

Virginia Gibson
David Newman
Kate Mancuso
Alex Ervin

Pro Bono Partner Spotlight: Fred Strober

Representation: Fletcher Street Urban Riding Club's Search for New Home

Representation Start: Fall 2020

Firm Name: Saul Ewing LLP

Brief review of representation: The Fletcher Street Urban Riding Club, a longstanding institution in Philadelphia's Strawberry Mansion neighborhood, has been instrumental in teaching generations of local youth about horsemanship and responsibility since 1980. As the Club faced the challenge of finding new land for its horses due to urban development, the Law Center provides legal representation alongside Saul Ewing LLP to ensure their continuity. On November 21, 2023, we celebrated the unveiling of brand-new stables at The Cliffs in East Fairmount Park, securing a space that will allow the Club to continue its vital work for years to come.

Can you provide an overview of the efforts to secure a new home for the Fletcher Street Urban Riding Club? What were the primary legal challenges or obstacles faced by the club?

The effort to find a new home for the Fletcher Street Urban Riding Club involved navigating various legal challenges, including zoning laws and city regulations. Communication between the club, legal representatives, and city officials was crucial to address issues such as lease terms, operational hours, and fundraising activities. While progress has been made, ongoing negotiations continue to refine the arrangement.

How did you and your team become involved in representing the Fletcher Street Urban Riding Club, and what motivated you to take on this pro bono case?

Our involvement in representing the Fletcher Street Urban Riding Club stemmed from our firm's relationship with PILCOP (former acronym of the Law Center) and a history of pro bono work. The project appealed to us due to its real estate aspects and the opportunity to support a longstanding community institution during its transition to a new location.



Can you describe the legal strategies or advocacy tactics employed to negotiate and secure a new location for the club within Philadelphia?

Legal strategies focused on maintaining open communication channels between all parties involved, balancing the needs of the club with city requirements, and navigating the bureaucratic processes efficiently. Negotiations, which should be wrapping up soon, prioritized resolving key lease clauses while ensuring the club's understanding of its obligations.



Reflecting on the successful outcome of this case, what do you consider to be the most significant achievements or impacts for the Fletcher Street Urban Riding Club and the broader community it serves?

I had the privilege of spending time with Ellis "El-Dog" Ferrell, discussing his background, vision, and journey. As a former schoolteacher deeply involved in community efforts, I appreciate organizations like Fletcher Street Urban Riding Club that offer extracurricular activities teaching valuable skills, empathy, and respect. Engaging with horses provides a unique opportunity for youth to learn and connect, evident in the joy on their faces and the positive impact on both youth and adults alike. This underscores the profound value of such community initiatives.

Securing a new home for the Fletcher Street Urban Riding Club signifies a significant achievement for both the club and the broader community it serves. This project not only preserves a vital community institution but also provides opportunities for youth development, teaching valuable skills, empathy, and respect. It's a privilege to contribute to such meaningful community efforts, enhancing the legacy of the club in Philadelphia for generations to come.

Other Pro Bono Partners on the Representation:

Ned Rahn

Pro Bono Partner Spotlight: Anne T. Marchitello

Case: William Penn et al. v. PA Dept. of Ed. et al.

Case Filed: November 10, 2014

Firm Name: O'Melveny & Myers

Brief review of representation: The lawsuit against Pennsylvania state officials, arguing that the state's school funding system violates the constitutional requirement for a thorough and efficient public education, was filed by six school districts, three families, the PA Assoc. of Rural and Small Schools, and the NAACP Pennsylvania State Conference. The Law Center represented petitioners alongside partners O'Melveny & Myers and the Education Law Center – PA. After a historic ruling by the Commonwealth Court on February 7, 2023, declaring the system unconstitutional, legislative leaders opted not to appeal. The victory is a catalyst for reform, requiring the commonwealth to ensure equitable and sufficient education funding statewide. Ongoing advocacy efforts aim to raise awareness and engage stakeholders in the fight for fair education funding. The case marks a pivotal moment in ensuring all Pennsylvania students, in every community, receive a quality public education as mandated by the state constitution.



What motivated you to become involved in this pro bono opportunity?

Education is one of the most important parts of a child's life. My mom was a middle school English teacher for over 40 years and my husband taught high school English in Philadelphia for two years. When I joined O'Melveny in 2019 and learned that we were partnering with the Law Center and ELC on this monumentally important lawsuit, I immediately knew that I had to join the team to help fight for equitable school funding in Pennsylvania.

What role did you play in the case, and what were your primary responsibilities throughout the process?

I had the honor of being one of the O'Melveny trial attorneys on the case, which also means that I was lucky enough to live in the Harrisburg Hilton with the Law Center's wonderful lawyers for four months. I helped coordinate all of the trial preparation, examined and cross-examined witnesses during the trial, and made sure all the "trains" were running according to schedule.

What were some of the key legal challenges or complexities encountered during the case, and how did you and the Law Centers address them together?

As to be expected in such a sweeping, important case, we encountered legal challenges and complexities at almost every turn. One of the main ones that comes to mind was how to define the Pennsylvania Constitution's Education Clause, which provides for a "thorough and efficient system of public education to serve the needs of the Commonwealth." But what does that mean in today's world? Defining that phrase in a judicially recognizable and manageable way and showing the Court what that meant in the day-to-day realities in Pennsylvania's school districts, was one of the key legal challenges we faced. As with the rest of the case, the entire trial team, comprised of the Law Center, ELC, and O'Melveny attorneys, worked together to strategize and elucidate the meaning for the Court, through compelling arguments and witness testimony.

Reflecting on the outcome of the case, what do you consider to be the most significant achievements or impacts, both legally and socially?

Not to overstate it, but this is the single most important decision for the futures of the children in Pennsylvania. It set the critically important precedent that education is a fundamental right in Pennsylvania and that every student is entitled to a comprehensive and contemporary system of public education.

How has your experience partnering on this historic case influenced your approach to pro bono work or shaped your understanding of social justice issues?

Working on this case has, hands down, been the most important and meaningful experience I've had as an attorney. Being able to work on a case with such huge implications for decades to come answers a call I have always had to serve the public interest and advocate for those whose needs go unmet.

Finally, what advice would you offer to other legal professionals considering engaging in pro bono partnerships with nonprofit organizations on similarly impactful cases?

Do it – it will most surely be one of the most rewarding experiences of your career!

Other Pro Bono Partners from O'Melveny & Myers:

Christopher P. Burke

Daniel L. Cantor

Timothée Charpié

John F. Dermody

Eli A. Grossman

Caitlyn Holuta

And from Willkie Farr & Gallagher LLP:

Katrina Robson

Thank you to all our pro bono partners from 2023 and 2024!

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