

Pro Bono Firm Of 2015: Dechert

By **Andrew McIntyre**

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Thanks to a continued commitment to taking on myriad voting rights cases as well as a significant focus on landlord-tenant disputes and human trafficking matters, Dechert LLP has landed a spot on Law360's list of Pro Bono Firms of 2015.

While Dechert's pro bono program asks all its lawyers — U.S. and international — to commit at least 25 hours a year, taking on broad range of matters, the firm is particularly proud of the work it's done in recent voter identification law cases.

Dechert recently won victories in suits challenging discriminatory and overly restrictive voter ID laws in Wisconsin and Texas, and the firm has also brought similar suits in Georgia and Ohio.

"I think our voting rights cases are a good example of some of the impact work that we do," said Suzanne E. Turner, a Washington, D.C.-based partner and chair of the firm's pro bono program. "Over the last decade, we've sort of taken on the right to vote. The right to vote is a fundamental right."

Dechert is currently representing Pine Ridge Reservation residents and members of the Oglala Sioux Tribe in South Dakota in their challenge to Jackson County's refusal to set up an early voting and registration station at the reservation.

"It's always surprising to me. I don't understand the resistance of making registration easy," said Neil A. Steiner, a New York-based partner who's working on the South Dakota matter. "Every now and then you run into it. ... These are, in my view, very important cases because of how fundamental the right to vote is."

U.S. attorneys at the firm on average worked more than triple the required 25 hours last year, putting in an average of 90.1 pro bono hours, according to the firm. That works out to 55,464 hours of pro bono work last year by U.S. attorneys.

And the firm also made the 25-hour-a-year a requirement effective for lawyers working outside the U.S. last year. That requirement has been in place for U.S. attorneys at the firm since 2007. The firm globally did 72,409 hours of pro bono work in 2014.

"We basically take a big tent approach to pro bono work," Turner said of the firm's effort to match skill

sets of lawyers with the needs of the community. "We try to create some efficiencies. Some economies of scale. We take on a wide array of cases."

Dechert recently helped the NAACP win a motion for summary judgment in a First Amendment case against the city of Philadelphia. After the organization sought to buy space in the Philadelphia airport for an ad addressing the imbalance of U.S. spending on incarceration versus education, the city subsequently adopted a policy barring ads not directly related to commercial transactions, which prompted the suit by the NAACP.

The city has been enjoined from enforcing the unconstitutional policy, and has appealed to the Third Circuit.

The firm has also taken more than 500 landlord-tenant cases pro bono in the Philadelphia area alone over the last couple years, and the process is now more efficient as Dechert lawyers have become experts in handling such matters.

"We're no longer spending 70 hours on cases that now take 20," Turner said.

While the firm has expertise in voter registration and landlord-tenant disputes, Dechert has also done significant pro bono work on human trafficking matters and helping various clients obtain visas in the U.S.

The firm is representing a Bangladeshi man who was brought to New York by the former consul general of Bangladesh and current Bangladeshi ambassador to Morocco. In that case, the Bangladeshi man is seeking, among other things, back pay for overtime hours he allegedly worked but was not paid for.

Last year, the firm helped obtain T visas for domestic workers who had been trafficked to the U.S. by diplomats from Kenya, Bolivia, Mozambique and Malawi.

And in another instance, the firm helped a mother become reunited with her two children, aged 9 and 11.

"That was probably one of the best experiences of my career. When I met them all together, it was amazing to see what a huge impact I could have," said Emily M. Shea, an associate who's been with Dechert since 2011 and works out of the firm's Washington, D.C., office. "I think pro bono is just an amazing way to get more extensive hands-on experience. Everybody takes pro bono work as seriously as billable matters."

"You choose what matters interest you. Suzie [Turner] has so many different connections," Shea noted. "You can go to Suzie and say, 'I'd like to work on this type of matter. I've always really wanted to work on a death penalty case.' Suzie will help to find a matter that matches your interest."

Indeed, thanks in part to Turner's connections, leadership and encouragement, the firm maintains a large docket of pro bono cases.

"Right now, we have 1,700 open pro bono matters around the firm. Many are small cases for poor people," Turner said. "Our work on them has hopefully made an enormous difference for an individual or an organization."

Turner said as local funding for legal services in other countries becomes harder and harder to come by, Dechert will continue work to help fill the lacuna.

The firm is working with London-based Justice on that organization's attempt to reform the long-standing U.K. system that has criminal defendants sit in a box separate from the courtroom.

"One could argue — what Justice is arguing — is that it undermines that notion of innocence until proven guilty. It also interferes with your ability to communicate with counsel," Turner said.

"Our hope is to keep doing what we're doing," she added. "There's a lot of excitement around here for pro bono."

That excitement is perhaps due in part to the firm allowing its lawyers to take on the very matters that are of most interest to them.

"It's great to be part of a firm that allows you to take on these cases. There's never any question about having a ... [matter] in the middle of South Dakota, 90 miles from the closest airport," Steiner said. "I couldn't really ask for more than that."

--Editing by Katherine Rautenberg.