

The Legal Intelligencer

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LEGAL & LITIGATION DEPARTMENTS OF THE YEAR



Photo by Nanette Kardaszkeski

Stradley Ronon Stevens & Young's litigation group.

STRADLEY RONON STEVENS & YOUNG

WINNER, GENERAL LITIGATION
(MIDSIZE FIRMS)

MAKING THE MOST OF MIDSIZE STRADLEY RONON TAKES 'LEAN AND MEAN' APPROACH BY LIZZY MCLELLAN

Of the Legal Staff

When a litigation team from Stradley, Ronon, Stevens & Young enters a courtroom, it's usually outnumbered by the attorneys on the other side. But the Stradley Ronon lawyers like it that way.

“The way that we staff matters is unique relative to the firms that we’re up against,” Michael O’Mara, chair of Stradley Ronon’s litigation department, said. “We just look for smaller teams and team continuity.”

It’s part of the firm’s emphasis on efficiency, chairman William R. Sasso said, which took hold when C. Clark Hodgson Jr. was chairman, from 1988 to 1993. O’Mara was a “student” of Hodgson, Sasso said, and took that philosophy “to a new level” as practice chair.

O’Mara said he looks to staff a matter with two or three lawyers “who can devote a lot of time and attention” to the case. O’Mara and Sasso said Stradley’s litigation teams are often up against opponents with twice as many lawyers. But O’Mara recalled an instance when the firm’s three-attorney team, in arbitration, went up against a group of at least seven lawyers from Jenner & Block. The Stradley lawyers were better able to present unified arguments, O’Mara said, and a lawyer from the Jenner & Block team mentioned that when they spoke afterward.

“Because we are the size we are, we take a lean and mean approach,” Sasso said. “We just assess a case, and spend a great deal of time assessing it in the beginning to make sure it’s staffed appropriately.”

In addition, he said, the clients benefit from having the same litigation team over long periods of time. More than half of the firm’s 30 litigation partners have spent their entire careers at Stradley Ronon.

“It gives the client consistency. They can count on having the same lawyers year after year,” Sasso said.

O’Mara said when litigators do leave the firm, they’re usually going in-house or making a career change. He is a “lifer,” as is managing partner and litigator Jeff Lutsky. Sasso, though not a litigator, also started his career at Stradley Ronon.

“We know each other very well and we work together very well as a result of that,” O’Mara said. “It absolutely has an impact on the results for our client.”

Sasso noted that the litigation teams are also encouraged to become

well-acquainted with clients, which also started with Hodgson.

“He preached ‘get to know your client’s interest so you can be an asset in determining what’s important to the client,’” he said.

But sometimes, they have to learn the client’s needs quickly.

In another recent case, a Stradley Ronon litigation team was able to jump in with little time before trial and secure a defense victory. Chartis Property Casualty Co. retained Daniel Fitch, Jeffrey Grossman and Benjamin Gordon last year just weeks before trial, and the six-day trial ended in a defense judgment. The insurer had paid more than \$18.5 million to the owner of a Villanova mansion that burnt down in 2012. The plaintiff, who rented the mansion, sought more than \$20 million, arguing that Chartis interfered with her attempt to purchase the home.

The firm’s litigation clients have also included multiple state agencies and governmental bodies, such as the Pennsylvania General Assembly, the Southeastern Pennsylvania Transportation Authority and the Pennsylvania Insurance Department.

Jon Bloom and Karl Myers of Stradley Ronon secured a Supreme Court win for the General Assembly last year, when the justices took up a long-running lawsuit brought by former beneficiaries of adultBasic, a state-subsidized health insurance program. The plaintiffs had challenged the General Assembly’s redirection of funds from a 2001 settlement with a number of tobacco companies, arguing that the legislators violated the Tobacco Settlement Act and the Pennsylvania Constitution. But the justices found that the plaintiffs were not entitled to any of the settlement funds under the Tobacco Settlement Act.

In other work for the General Assembly, Bloom, Myers and Chelsea Biemiller of Stradley Ronon defended Sen. David Argall, R-Berks, in a federal



case challenging the constitutionality of a Pennsylvania criminal law statute. The defense team was successful in getting Argall dismissed from the case.

In a discrimination and retaliation claim brought by a former laboratory manager, Stradley Ronon lawyers Danielle Banks and Michelle Carson were able to narrow the case pre-trial and secure a defense verdict after a jury trial. In another instance, an age discrimination claim brought by a former SEPTA bus operator, the same team of Stradley Ronon lawyers argued that SEPTA had produced evidence of a legitimate reason for dismissal. The court awarded summary judgment to SEPTA.

The focus on efficiency has even taken shape in Stradley Ronon’s approach to representing more than 100 investors as they sue Petroleo Brasileiro in connection with a multibillion dollar securities fraud. The investors are choosing to file direct lawsuits instead of participating in a class action. The approach fits in with the firm’s strategy toward efficiency, Sasso said, as it allows the investors to get more individual attention for their losses.

“That is literally groundbreaking, the work we’re doing in that area for our financial institution clients. And they end up with a much higher recovery,” he said. “The client isn’t tossed in with a whole group of other plaintiffs.”

Stradley Ronon lawyers Keith Dutil, Joseph Kelleher and Marissa Parker are representing the investors, along with co-counsel from Kessler, Topaz, Meltzer & Check. O’Mara said it’s one of the more interesting matters his department is working on now.

“It’s not the type of thing that many, if any Philadelphia firms are doing, but we’ve developed a nice niche in that space,” O’Mara said. •