

'We're for the Common Man': Growing NYC Personal Injury Firm Recruits Public Defenders for New Civil Rights Practice

BY ANDREW DENNEY

When the firm that would eventually become Shulman & Hill was launched in 2013, it was a solo practice consisting of founding partner Alex Shulman handling workers' compensation cases.

The now-midlevel firm has grown considerably in just under a decade. It has beefed up its headcount to 30 attorneys and 40 paralegals. It established a home base in Manhattan's Financial District and planted satellite offices in the outer boroughs, Long Island and New Jersey.

In that time, the firm has also enriched its practice-area palette. It added a Social Security practice and personal injury—with a focus on construction site accident cases—became its specialty.

And just six months ago, it added a civil rights practice to the mix, focusing on police brutality, wrongful arrest and wrongful conviction cases.

These days, one does not often hear of firms adding attorneys to focus on growing a book of civil rights business. But firm leaders say the fledgling practice helps Shulman & Hill build a full-service practice for people who do not usually have the means to build long-term—and trusting—relationships with expensive Manhattan attorneys.

"You never lose out by helping a person," Shulman said in an interview with the Law Journal at the firm's headquarters. "When we help a person, they'll send us their family members. They'll send us their friends. We're not so over-focused on the individual recovering on an individual case. We're focused on serving the community.

"When you service the community in the proper way, you're able to leverage that and you're able to grow both in volume and the number of settlements," he added.

To get the new practice rolling,



Shulman & Hill: Pictured, from left, are Jenny Chen, civil rights law clerk; Cass Luskin, associate attorney; Cary London, partner; David R. Kline, associate attorney; and Belinda Jaime, civil rights paralegal.

Photo: Ryland West/ALM

the firm recruited three former public defenders who worked together at Brooklyn Defender Services. Now the team has about 350 pending cases, and is disposing three or four of them every week, said partner Cary London, who is leading the practice.

London has already made a name for himself in the civil rights space in recent years, grabbing headlines for his work representing plaintiffs in wrongful conviction and brutality cases against the New York City Police Department.



Photo: Ryland West/ALM

From left, are Cass Luskin; Cary London; Alex Shulman, founding partner; David R. Kline; and JJ Hill, founding partner.



Photo: Ryland West/ALM

From left, are Belinda Jaime, Cass Luskin, Cary London, Jenny Chen and David R. Kline.

Prior to working together at Brooklyn Defender Services, associates David Kline and Cass Luskin spent years as public defenders in Louisiana.

“We saw a revolving door of justice,” London said. “There were Band-Aids being put on gunshot wounds. We’ve had young adults, we’ve had kids, we’ve had women, we’ve had transgender people being arrested for nonsense.”

London said that, from their experience defending low-income clients in criminal cases, the attorneys know all too well that even after they’ve won an acquittal, the challenges they face in life don’t end there. Even low-level offenses like riding a bike on a sidewalk or drinking in public can be disruptive in ways that people in more privileged communities may not be able to perceive.

“Where the criminal case ends, the story doesn’t have to end and it shouldn’t end,” Kline said. “In order to reform, these stories need to be told. And that’s exactly what this



The gong Shulman & Hill rings after winning settlements. Photo: Ryland West/ALM

practice endeavors to do, to tell these stories.”

While successful wrongful conviction cases have the potential of turning out multimillion-dollar payouts for plaintiffs, the vast majority of civil rights cases may result in five-figure settlements.

But a \$20,000 settlement for a low-income client in a civil rights case could be life-changing, London said—it could mean paying for a car or being able to afford rent for a New York City apartment.

Shulman & Hill leaders said adding the new practice was a natural fit for the firm as it looks to continue growing both its geographic reach and its offering of services. The firm also of-

fers representation in criminal and immigration matters and plans to dip its toe into mass torts.

Within the quickly-growing firm, leaders have fostered a startup culture that emphasizes innovation and rebirth. Employee morale is also a top priority—in addition to holding frequent events to bring colleagues together, the firm has a gong for attorneys to hit whenever they negotiate a settlement to bring everyone together and tell them how they sealed the deal.

“We’re taking ourselves away from the paradigm of a traditional law firm,” Shulman said. “We operate this place like a start up. If there’s one thing that describes our culture, it’s innovation.”

