

TEAMING UP TO REUNITE FAMILIES

► **Akin Gump Pro Bono Partner Steve Schulman, Pro Bono Counsel Lauren Connell and SunPower Corporation Senior Litigation Counsel Whitney Mack discuss their recent collaboration during the ongoing immigration crisis on America's southern border.**

CCBJ: How did the collaboration on the reunification of families in El Paso come together?

Steve Schulman: It all started with an email – shortly after the family separation crisis began – from one of my partners in Los Angeles who asked if there were opportunities for some of our corporate clients to get involved, including SunPower. We had been doing some work at the Karnes Detention Center in Texas, so it made sense to start there. At that point, women and children were being held at the Family Detention Center, the same place they had been held since 2014. This was not something that had arisen out of family separation specifically, but obviously it was part and parcel of the immigration crisis.

I went to SunPower in summer 2018 to give an overall presentation about the Karnes Detention Center and some of the work that we had been doing there and how SunPower might be able to fit into the work, either by directly representing clients with us, writing briefs or in other ways.

Shortly after this presentation, Akin Gump learned of an opportunity to help separated families in El Paso. The skills I covered during the training about Karnes were also applicable to this work, so I reached out to SunPower to see if they were interested in helping us on the ground there. SunPower quickly said, “Yes, we’ll

do it. We’ll get a team out there.” I’ve worked with many in-house law departments over the years, and SunPower was one of the most responsive and determined groups I’ve ever collaborated with.

Whitney Mack: Within a few days of Steve’s presentation, an email was sent around at SunPower with an Excel spreadsheet that essentially asked, “What are your skills? What languages do you speak and what is your availability?” Then, from there, as Steve just described, they reached out to us and offered to provide training. Most of us did not have experience in immigration work, so that was incredibly helpful. We essentially defined what our skills were, what languages we spoke and when our availability was, and we were able to pull a team together.

Jennifer Rappoport, our Vice President, Global Litigation and Employment here at SunPower, and I had a follow-up video conference with Akin Gump’s team to get more specific training on what to expect in El Paso. It was a really effective way to get us prepared to go to the border.

In practice, what did the collaboration look like and what did some of the work streams look like, in terms of how both sides teamed up?

Lauren Connell: What’s really interesting is how



Steve Schulman is Akin Gump’s pro bono partner and leads the firm’s pro bono practice. He maintains a substantive practice in many areas of public interest law, including human rights, immigration, assistance to military personnel and poverty law matters. Reach him at ssschulman@akingump.com.



quickly it came together. We had our first call at Akin Gump about the family separation crisis maybe on July 31. On August 1, Steve gave the SunPower training, and we made a decision to go down on August 2, and that's when we started talking to SunPower about collaborating. Basically, what happened in those few days was that Akin Gump coordinated with the Immigration Justice Campaign, as well as Annunciation House, a shelter network for refugees recently released into the El Paso community, to figure out who we would be serving. Who would the clients be? The collaboration between Akin Gump and SunPower really centered on five different parents who remained separated from their children.

In late June, the judge presiding over the separated families litigation came down with an order imposing a deadline of July 26 for all of these families to be reunited. A week after that deadline had passed, these parents still had not been reunited with their children. We were given a group of parents who had all entered the country around mid May to early June, who remained separated

from their children and who were in various facilities in the El Paso area. One of the challenges with this particular project was that the three facilities were not necessarily close to one another.

One facility was in Central El Paso right near the airport. That was the El Paso Services Processing Center. We also had clients at another facility in Sierra Blanca, Texas, at least an hour and a half from El Paso. Then there was a third facility that was just over the state border in New Mexico, about a 30-minute drive from El Paso. Most of these clients had already started their immigration process but had not had legal counsel and, as a result, were struggling to even remain in the country and continue their pursuit of asylum.

Whitney and Jennifer from SunPower came down on Wednesday, August 8. At that point, Akin Gump had been on the ground since Monday, and Wednesday was a turning point, with some new Akin Gump lawyers coming down and others departing. At that point, we were equipped to make some headway on both the immi-

gration side and the reunification side. One thing I'm so grateful to SunPower for was that, given the extraordinary nature of this situation, the people on the ground were comfortable with uncertainty and really blazing a path forward.

Mack: We went to the Annunciation House offices right after we landed and met the Akin Gump team. From the moment we got there, it was incredibly collaborative. We were all in a war room together around a bunch of tables with our laptops looking through the files, reading over court orders to get up to speed. Then we got to work with the Akin Gump team to make sure we were fully briefed on the context and background of the cases that Akin Gump had agreed to take on.

What were some key outcomes of the collaboration?

Connell: The five families we worked with primarily were from Honduras and Guatemala. The best part about this collaboration was that we were able to get all five of those families reunited. The parents were reunited with their children and then released into the community to be with family members or friends, whoever their local contacts in the U.S. were. Those five families are now scattered throughout the United States – two in south Florida, one in Alabama, one in the D.C.



Lauren Connell is Akin Gump's pro bono counsel. She maintains an active practice focused on immigration matters and advising nonprofit organizations. Reach her at lconnell@akingump.com.

area and one in the New York area. I was fortunate enough to see two of the families reunited in person. It was one of the most emotional experiences I've ever had as a lawyer to see these families who had been separated for close to four months come together and just feel that relief. It was one of the most powerful things I've ever seen in my life.

What has the feedback from the SunPower personnel working on this initiative been like?

Mack: Even though we only had two attorneys there on site, we had an overwhelming response within our law department. We had some of our legal staff participate in helping coordinate the travel to get out there to help coordinate the logistics of it even though they could not physically be out there.

It was a team effort on SunPower's part to really jump on this opportunity. I totally echo what Lauren said earlier. I shared with many of my colleagues afterward that this was one of the most rewarding things I have done with my law degree to date. I can't thank Akin Gump enough for how seamless they made this for us. It was a really wonderful experience, and it's something that I will continue to do. I actually have plans to do more pro bono immigration work in the Austin area in the coming months. ■



Whitney Mack is senior counsel with SunPower Corporation. She has more than seven years of experience in large firm and in-house counsel environments. Reach her at whitney.mack@sunpower.com.