

Professional Services

# With large peers threatened by Trump, Philadelphia's smaller law firms are speaking out

Kline & Specter co-founder Shanin Specter

KLINE & SPECTER



By [Jeff Blumenthal](#) – Senior Reporter, Philadelphia Business Journal  
Apr 16, 2025 **Updated** Apr 17, 2025 9:57am EDT

The co-founder of Kline & Specter is among those speaking out against President Donald Trump's campaign to put the squeeze on large law firms he perceives as being adversarial to his interests.

While his Center City plaintiffs personal injury firm has not been directly impacted, Shanin Specter said he feels the need to push back at a time when many lawyers and law firms have chosen a more cautious approach to the president's actions.

“There is a certain irony, of course, because a lot of these targeted firms are adversaries of ours in civil litigation,” Specter said. “But there's a much higher purpose here. And in my view, everybody needs to speak out. This is a true character test for every lawyer in every law firm in the United States. It's just not sufficient to bury your head and say, let somebody else do it.”

Kline & Specter was [one of 504 U.S. law firms to sign an amicus brief](#) in support of a lawsuit filed last month by Seattle-based Perkins Coie seeking to stop an executive order from Trump that essentially cripples the firm's ability to represent its clients. Perkins Coie is among several top law firms facing executive orders that bar their lawyers from entering federal buildings and discourage federal officials from interacting with them.

Los Angeles-based Munger Tolles & Olson and Chicago's Eimer Stahl filed the amicus brief on April 4, and Specter said he personally recruited about 30 plaintiffs law firms to sign it. Washington's WilmerHale and Chicago's Jenner & Block also filed lawsuits and [are seeking summary judgments in federal court](#) to quash similar orders from Trump that they believe violate the First Amendment.

Though Trump's executive orders target some of the nation's largest law firms, the signatories on the Perkins Coie amicus brief are mostly smaller firms. Other local firms that signed on include plaintiff litigation firms Anapol Weiss, Berger Montague, Langer Grogan & Diver and Grant & Eisenhofer. White collar defense lawyer Ellen Brotman of Brotman Law and litigation boutique Stapleton Segal Cochran also signed.

No large Philadelphia-based firms signed the brief. The Business Journal asked the city's seven AmLaw 100 law firms whether they had been asked to sign the brief in support of Perkins Coie and, if so, why they declined to do so. None

of those firms chose to comment on the record, with four not responding to the inquiry.

One local managing partner, who spoke on the condition of anonymity, said their firm was asked and declined to sign the brief. The law firm leader noted that only a handful of large firms chose to sign and half of them were among the firms already targeted by the Trump administration. The lawyer said most big firms conducted a risk-reward analysis and concluded that having their name associated with litigation against the administration far exceeded the benefits.

“And whether people like it or not, law firm leaders have a fiduciary obligation to protect their law firms,” the managing partner said. “From a moral perspective, I wanted to sign anything and everything and put my name to it, but all I would be doing would be putting my firm in jeopardy.”

The lawyer noted that Susman Godfrey, a Houston firm with just over 170 lawyers, signed the brief and Trump soon after [signed an executive order against the firm](#), which represented Dominion Voting Systems in securing a [\\$787 million settlement in a defamation lawsuit against Fox News](#) over claims made about the 2020 presidential election.

On Tuesday, a federal judge in Washington, D.C., [granted a temporarily restraining order against the Trump administration's enforcement of the executive order](#) against Susman Godfrey, a day after the law firm filed a lawsuit. That is the fourth TRO secured by a law firm against the Trump administration, with nine other firms reaching agreements with Trump to provide at least \$940 million worth of pro bono services collectively to avoid the threatened sanctions.

The local managing partner who spoke to the Business Journal said the tougher decision would be whether to fight or cut a deal if and when the Trump administration issues an executive order against their firm. While plaintiff

firms like Kline & Specter largely represent individuals, larger firms have to worry about whether signing the brief would put themselves and their corporate clients in Trump's crosshairs.

Specter took issue with what he believes is a philosophy among large law firms that if they keep their heads down, the Trump administration won't target them.

“That’s wrong on all counts,” Specter said. “You can't hide from your associates, partners, clients, the law students for whom you offered summer employment,” Specter said. “What may have been avoided yesterday probably can't be avoided tomorrow.”

The battles between Trump and big law firms took a turn on March 20 when the president rescinded an executive order he signed against New York’s Paul Weiss Rifkind Wharton & Garrison in exchange for the firm agreeing to eliminate all diversity, equity and inclusion programs within 14 days, provide \$40 million in pro bono services to Trump initiatives, and abandon “partisan decision-making” in its representations.

The decision from Paul Weiss to cut a deal with the Trump administration sent shockwaves through political and legal circles. Three other New York legal titans – Skadden Arps Slate Meagher & Flom, Willkie Farr and Milbank – reached similar deals. Trump has also announced agreements with the nation's largest law firm, Chicago-rooted Kirkland & Ellis, along with Los Angeles-rooted Latham & Watkins and New York heavyweights A&O Sherman, Simpson Thacher & Bartlett and Cadwalader.

The order against Paul Weiss is similar to those issued against several other large law firms, accusing them of "weaponization of government or actions of lawfare." The firms were also accused of undermining American interests and engaging in discriminatory employment practices.

One common thread among the targeted firms is that they have or had lawyers representing clients averse to Trump's interests. In the case of Paul Weiss, one of its attorneys assisted Manhattan District Attorney Alvin Bragg in securing a conviction against Trump last year on 34 felony counts of falsifying business records.

When Paul Weiss reached its deal, Specter made a post on LinkedIn titled “[My top 10 list of mistakes in the Paul Weiss negotiation and where we should go from here.](#)” In it, he criticized the law firm for, among other things, representing itself in the talks and not getting buy-in from rank-and-file lawyers at the firm.

“Paul Weiss has revealed it has a glass jaw,” Specter wrote. “That predicts a poor outcome for them in future fights. Their capitulation emboldens President Trump to threaten other law firms, as he’s now successfully done with Skadden and others.”

The post soon garnered 40,000 impressions and 375 comments, which further motivated Specter. He began working with other plaintiffs litigation law firms around the country to offer positions to law students who want to get out of summer associate positions they accepted with the firms that cut deals with Trump. Then he and other firms began assisting with the amicus brief.

Specter is no stranger to locking horns with Trump. Last week, a federal judge declined the president’s motion to dismiss a defamation lawsuit Specter filed against him last November on behalf of the Central Park Five – five Black and Hispanic men exonerated of assaulting a jogger in New York in 1989. In the 20-page ruling, U.S. District Judge Wendy Beetlestone in Philadelphia said [comments Trump made about the men during the October presidential debate](#) at the National Constitution Center could not be defended as "substantially true."



Katayun Jaffari is a partner at Cozen O'Connor and chancellor of the Philadelphia Bar Association.

COZEN O'CONNOR

---

Fellow law firms are not the only entities offering support to those targeted by Trump's executive orders. The Philadelphia Bar Association joined more than a dozen metro and affinity legal trade associations in filing [their own amicus brief](#) on behalf of Perkins Coie's motion for summary judgment and this week joined similar briefs in support of Jenner & Block and WilmerHale.

In a statement, Philadelphia Bar Association Chancellor Katayun Jaffari said it was "important for us to represent lawyers and law firms by expressing our condemnation for any efforts of intimidation of lawyers who are simply obeying an oath they took in order to do their jobs. ... Threatening the legal profession discourages individuals and communities from defending their rights and seeking their day in court, thereby breaking down the fundamental freedoms that we all possess."

Specter said he believes more is at stake as it pertains to practicing law in the U.S. than at any time in his 41 years as a lawyer. While he has been

disappointed that more prominent lawyers and law firms have not taken a stand on the issue, he emphasized that there is still room for them to get involved at a stage he said is akin to the third round of a 15-round boxing match.

“I don't know how it's going to work itself out, but it's never too late to do the right thing,” Specter said. “There's lots of opportunities today and moving forward to get into this fight and push back, and that's what a lot of us are doing.”

---

*[Sign up here](#) for the Philadelphia Business Journal's free newsletters, and [download our free app](#) for breaking news alerts.*