

## Garfunkel Wild's Second-Ever Chairman Is Already Thinking About the Next Generation of Leadership

Andrew Blustein said his firm, which focuses on the health care industry, has become an "educational and client-focused powerhouse" this year.

BY LIZZY MCLELLAN

When Andrew Blustein joined Garfunkel Wild 28 years ago, the firm had a dozen lawyers. Now it has grown to more than 80, but Blustein, who will become the firm chairman effective Oct. 1, is only the second person to hold that role in the firm's history.

Robert Wild, who founded the firm more than 40 years ago in Great Neck, New York, will move into the role of chairman emeritus, and he does so following a growth spurt at Garfunkel Wild. In the last year, it has added 12 lawyers, doubled the size of its Connecticut office, and added a biotechnology, life science and medical device practice group.

Blustein spoke with the New York Law Journal about what he envisions for the near and far future of the midsize firm, including serving health care clients in the midst of a pandemic and setting things in

motion for the next generation of partners and leaders. (His answers have been edited lightly for style.)

**Firm Name:** Garfunkel Wild

**Firm Leader:** Andrew Blustein, chairman

**Head Count:** 83

**Locations:** Great Neck and Albany, New York; Hackensack, New Jersey; Stamford, Connecticut

**Practice Areas:** Full-service with a focus on the health care industry

**Governance structure and compensation model:** Garfunkel Wild is governed by a combination of the chairman and an executive management committee (which has some appointed and some elected shareholders). This governance structure also meets with—and receives guidance from—the partnership. As we have evolved, the interaction between the chairman, the executive committee and the partnership has been very effective in allowing us to



Andrew Blustein, chair of Garfunkel Wild

meet challenges and continue our growth. This approach makes for a simple governance structure with built-in flexibility. Our compensation is decided by a compensation committee and our model is based on reviewing data and considering many factors both on an individual and collective firm basis.

**Do you offer alternative fee arrangements?** Yes, we are willing

to talk to our clients and propose a customized billing arrangement that may meet their particular need. Value-based billing offers pricing certainty to clients and financial predictability. It also expands opportunities for operational efficiency. Hourly billing has been a dominant model for the legal profession for many years, however, our lower fee structure positions our firm well and makes us very competitive in the market. We strive to keep overall billing to clients efficient and competitive.

**What do you view as the two biggest opportunities for your firm, and what are the two biggest threats?**

One of our greatest opportunities as a midsize firm is our ability to offer our clients big-firm quality service at a lower cost structure. This allows us to be highly competitive in attracting work and top-tier legal talent. Whether you are a Big Law transplant, lateral or a recent law firm graduate you will be surrounded by colleagues who are motivated, accessible and passionate about the law.

Another opportunity is that we have very deep experience in the health care sector but offer a full range of legal services to complement that experience. Whether it is real estate, litigation, bankruptcy,

employment law, corporate or other more general areas of the law, our attorneys combine these disciplines with our focus areas of health care specialization.

The biggest threat to Garfunkel Wild (and many law firms) is the overall economy. Obviously, we are dependent on strong economic activity. We have positioned ourselves well during the pandemic, but if that was going to stretch out to an economic downturn that presents another tier of difficulty. The second—and related concern—is a second wave of coronavirus outbreaks.

**The legal market is so competitive now—what trends do you see, and has anything, including alternative service providers, altered your approach? Is your chief competition other midmarket firms, or is your firm competing against big firms for the same work?**

We are very sophisticated in terms of what we can handle and we compete against larger firms every day. A differentiator for our clients is our fine-tuned holistic lawyering approach in which we strive to understand all aspects of our clients' business, culture, needs and concerns. This allows our attorneys the ability to provide efficient and strategic solutions to our clients.

**There is much debate around how law firms can foster the next generation of legal talent. What advantages and disadvantages do midsize firms have in attracting and retaining young lawyers, particularly millennials?**

As a midsize firm, we have the size, structure and ability to offer leadership and meaningful legal projects early on to the next generation of legal talent and laterals who want to avoid being another face in the crowd. We care about the development of legal talent and focus attention on providing leadership opportunities coupled with the guidance and feedback that young lawyers and millennials need to succeed. By staffing projects leanly with a partner in charge, associates will have direct client interaction and the ability to develop relationships with clients.

**Does your firm employ any nonlawyer professionals in high-level positions (e.g. COO, business development officer, chief strategy officer, etc.)? If so, why is it advantageous to have a nonlawyer in that role? If not, have you considered hiring any?**

We depend upon our nonlawyer professionals including our chief operating officer, director of marketing and business development, accounting and technology leaders. Many have come from

among the legal, accounting and the technology industries with unique perspectives that have contributed to our success. As an accountant, our chief operating officer's diverse background and experience enables him to efficiently manage cross-functional business operations. Bringing nonlawyers into those roles is the appropriate way to run a firm because you want the best people in their respective fields and you want lawyers devoted to servicing clients in a legal capacity.

**What would you say is the most innovative thing your firm has done recently, whether it be technology advancements, internal operations, how you work with clients, etc.?**

During the pandemic, Garfunkel Wild became an educational and client-focused powerhouse. On the educational perspective, our attorneys created and participated in many webinars on various topics such as telehealth, employment issues and meeting operational challenges. These

webinars, together with our legal alerts, attracted thousands and we became a go-to resource for all the regulatory changes that were being promulgated. Similarly, clients were besieged by new and substantial problems and our attorneys worked around the clock to be crisis managers and problem solvers.

We also wanted to contribute to the community using our focus on health care. One example was a recent pro bono project where we introduced community activists and donors to one of our system hospital clients in order to create a COVID-19 testing facility filled with ventilators and other crucial equipment.

**Does your firm have a succession plan in place? If so, what challenges do you face in trying to execute that plan? If you don't currently have a plan, is it an issue your firm is thinking about?**

Succession planning needs to be done on a leadership and client level. As attorneys work with clients on a daily basis, they begin to

develop strong relationships with existing clients. Our firm encourages and fosters these relationships so that when a partner retires or leaves the firm, the next generation can assure client continuity.

My journey to chairman is exactly how our successful leadership succession plan has been and continues to be enacted and executed. I arrived at Garfunkel Wild as a third-year associate 28 years ago, over time firm leadership gave me increasing opportunities to serve on important projects and be part of varying committees. I was appointed vice chairman four years ago, allowing me to work with outgoing chairman Robert Wild and other firm leaders while transitioning into the new role. At Garfunkel Wild our leaders evolve into their roles and as I step into my new role as chairman on Oct. 1, it is my priority to continue cultivating the next generation of firm leadership.

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