

Big Law Firms in DC Prioritize West Coast Business Growth

By Abigail Adcox

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What You Need to Know

- D.C. firms have been steadily adding to their attorney headcounts in their West Coast offices over the past several years.
- Firm leaders at Arnold & Porter, Crowell, Wilmer and Steptoe indicated that growing their West Coast presence is a priority for their firms.

The connections between D.C. law firms and West Coast offices are heating up.

Attracted by tech and regulatory business, several law firms headquartered in Washington, D.C., or with a big presence in the nation's capital are making a push to grow in California and the West Coast broadly, with some steadily adding to their attorney headcounts in the region.

Firm leaders at Crowell & Moring; Wilmer Cutler Pickering Hale and Dorr; Arnold & Porter Kaye Scholer; and Steptoe indicated in interviews that growing their presence on the West Coast is a priority for their firms, citing client business in their litigation, transactional, health care, life sciences, technology and AI practices.

"In our strategic plan, it's been a very significant area of intended growth, with the desire to mirror what are some of the strengths of our firm and take advantage of a lot of our clients who have substantial presence in California and need support out there," said Crowell & Moring's chair Phil Inglima.

Crowell has doubled the size of its three offices in California in the last two decades, adding



Credit: Adboe Stock

26 new lawyers in California last year alone, between recruitment of junior laterals and group additions, according to Inglima.

In July last year, Crowell hired two in-house senior counsel attorneys from Amazon, Clay Marquez and Meghan McMeel, as partners in San Francisco. The firm brought on a health care litigation group of more than 40 lawyers, including 16 partners, from Reed Smith last fall in California, Chicago and Dallas.

Meanwhile, Arnold & Porter opened a Seattle office last July with a four-partner group from K&L Gates, as the firm looks to expand its West Coast presence.

The firm now has 36 lawyers and staff in Seattle with plans to keep growing, according to Pallavi Mehta Wahi, head of Arnold & Porter's

Seattle office and chair of the firm's western U.S. strategic growth.

Wahi added that Arnold & Porter sees "continued momentum" in Seattle and across the West Coast in several practices, including technology and AI, healthcare, regulatory and enforcement, energy and environmental, and commercial IP litigation. "Those continue to be growth areas for us," said Wahi.

"Our global co-chair [Ellen Kaye Fleishhacker] sits on the West Coast. So we are very committed to growing [in] the West Coast," Wahi added.

Several firm leaders cited the ever-growing tech industry from the West Coast and the regulatory, litigation and transactional needs those clients have.

"We've been trying to equip ourselves more and more for the needs of both AI-focused clients and clients who intersect with the growth of AI," said Inglima.

"It's startling to me just how many not just emerging, but quite successful, rapidly maturing companies are rising up with an entire focus on AI," he added. "It's impossible to talk about that region or that market sector without acknowledging that that obviously has been the primary catalyst for seismic change."

More Growth Planned

Step toe chair Gwen Renigar also said her firm is seeking to add talent in California in the upcoming year. "Our financial services teams are doing really well, and we've brought on a number of strong first-chair trial lawyers, as well as strong tech litigators," said Step toe chair Gwen Renigar.

Step toe added Corey Laplante in its commercial trial and litigation group in Los Angeles last September from tech company Mixhalo Corp., where he was most recently co-chief executive officer. This year, the firm has already added former assistant U.S. Attorney for the Central District of California Jamari Buxton as a partner in its investigations, white-collar defense & compliance practice in Los Angeles.

For its part, Wilmer is also planting deeper roots in California. The firm announced a series of leadership appointments within its transactional department last month, including several based on the West Coast.

For instance, Judith Hasko became chair of the firm's transactional department, succeeding Mick Bain at the beginning of this year, following Bain's retirement. Hasko, who sits in the firm's Palo Alto office, said in a recent interview that the transactional department's appointments underscore the firm's commitment to growth on the West Coast.

"We are looking to grow, particularly on the West Coast, and that's been a key objective of the firm for years now," said Hasko. "With my taking this role, this is a good moment to underscore that commitment, but conversely, we also have strengths across our practices in the U.S. So if you look at this, you'll see that the vice chairs are in different offices, and that is necessary and healthy for the corporate practice to have that."

Inglima said that Crowell is eyeing more growth in California, including in the transactional space and the intersection between regulatory and litigation.

"It will be focused on continuing to expand our transactional capacity on the West Coast. We've had success in the Bay Area. We've had some intermittent transactional strength in Southern California. We want to make that a greater focus up and down the coast," said Inglima. "But I also see opportunity for more growth on the sort of intersect between regulatory and litigation."

Already this year, Crowell hired former co-chair of Buchalter's white collar and government investigations practice Joshua Robbins as a partner in its Orange County office. Robbins joined the firm's healthcare litigation team.

"We don't know what's coming next, but we know that often it comes out of California and makes it exciting and worthwhile to be there," Inglima added.