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Phone: +1 646 783 7100 | Fax: +1 646 783 7161 | customerservice@law360.com

Firms Drop Clients, Offer Aid Amid War In Ukraine

By Rachel Rippetoe

Law360 (February 28, 2022, 2:44 PM EST) -- As war rages between Russia and Ukraine, some firms are responding by offering a helping hand to fleeing Ukrainian residents, while others are cutting ties with Russian clients to comply with sanctions designed to debilitate Russia's global influence.

While pro bono practice leaders told Law360 that finding ways to immediately aid Ukrainian citizens has been a challenge, Paul Weiss Rifkind Wharton & Garrison LLP on Monday said it had made "significant donations" to a variety of organizations helping Ukrainian refugees. Greenberg Traurig LLP said it is donating up to \$2 million in aid and pro bono work, and Crowell & Moring LLP and Ropes & Gray LLP also said they would be bulking up their pro bono services.

Other firms have begun cutting ties with their Russian clients. Venable LLP and Sidley Austin LLP both told Law360 on Monday that they had severed ties with their Russian banking clients, Sberbank and VTB Group, respectively.

"VTB Group is no longer a client with Sidley Austin in compliance with U.S. sanctions," a spokesperson for the firm said.

Paul Weiss' chairman, Brad S. Karp, said in a statement on Sunday that the firm, "shocked, horrified and heartbroken by the unprovoked, full-scale invasion of Ukraine by Russian forces," would be ramping up its pro bono services and had already made donations to a number of aid organizations, including International Rescue Committee, Ukrainian Red Cross, UN Crisis Relief and Project Hope.

"Our lawyers worked courageously to protect the Jews of Europe during World War II by changing American policy towards immigration and arranging for tens of thousands of European Jews to secure safe refuge in America," Karp said. "Today, we are closely following the dire situation in Ukraine, and are mobilizing our pro bono resources to work with relief organizations and legal services providers to help those desperately in need."

The firm also encouraged staff members and lawyers to donate independently, noting that it has a policy in place to match the donations up to \$1,500. Special counsel for the firm Steve Banks also told Law360 that Paul Weiss is partnering with expert immigration legal services providers to help meet the need for legal aid, including screening people for any special immigration relief that becomes available.

"For now, while we watch the horror unfolding hour by hour from afar, our financial support for these

organizations will make an immediate difference on the ground and our legal support will facilitate the vital work being performed by these organizations to help the hundreds of thousands of Ukrainian refugees secure safe refuge around the globe," Karp said.

Greenberg Traurig told Law360 on Monday that the firm has donated \$1 million of aid through its charitable fund and will also match what its attorneys and staff donate up to \$1 million.

The firm will also work through its Warsaw, Poland office to provide "significant coordinated pro bono legal services, as well as humanitarian aid, both as individual lawyers and staff, and as one unified firm worldwide," Executive Chairman Richard A. Rosenbaum said.

"Many of us feel powerless or much worse as we watch the daily horrors in the Ukraine," Rosenbaum said. "As we have watched the incredibly courageous fight being waged by the Ukrainian people in the streets of their cities, to protect their homes, their children, and their freedom, we also see this as a defining moment for liberty, democracy, and justice around the world. As lawyers, it is not only our right, but our duty to speak out and to do more."

Caroline Heller, a partner in the firm's New York office and chair of its global pro bono efforts, will also be assisting Warsaw partners Lejb Fogelman and Robert Lis with pro bono work, Rosenbaum said.

Crowell & Moring also expressed a desire to help. The firm told Law360 that it has not seen an immediate call for pro bono services, but "that may change quickly as Ukrainians flee the violence in coming days."

The firm said that a number of attorneys have already expressed interest in offering pro bono services similar to the work firms did for Afghan refugees last year when the U.S. pulled its troops out.

"As was the case in the Afghanistan crisis and so many others, the repercussions of this event will reverberate out for months and even years, and our pro bono program is preparing to support Ukrainian citizens with pro bono services in the months and years to come," a spokesperson for Crowell & Moring told Law360.

Ropes & Gray also put out a statement last week expressing the firm's commitment to "providing pro bono legal assistance to individuals and families caught in the Ukraine conflict, should the need arise."

Jenny Rikoski, partner and co-chair of Ropes & Gray's pro bono committee, said the firm is closely watching what is happening in Ukraine and is ready to help.

However, the U.K.'s foreign minister has accused law firms of hindering the government's efforts to impose sanctions on Russia. According to reporting from the Independent, Foreign Secretary Liz Truss told MPs that certain law firms are holding up Britain's efforts to sanction Russian oligarchs.

Truss apparently told members of Parliament in a briefing that it was time to "name and shame" law firms helping their Russian clients prevent government sanctions.

But several BigLaw firms have begun cutting ties with their Russian clients in accordance with sanctions, including Sidley Austin, Venable and Baker McKenzie. The latter firm didn't say specifically with whom it

was cutting ties, but it said it would be taking a look at its current operations to assure it is complying with the current sanctions. The firm represented Russia's Ministry of Finance on a sovereign bond offering last year and advised VTB Bank on a refinancing agreement in 2020.

--Additional reporting by Brandon Lowrey. Editing by Steven Edelstone.

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