

April 18,
2025

Statement for Washington Lawyers' Committee for
Civil Rights Chairs and Co-Chairs

The signatories to this statement are former Chairs and Co-Chairs, and a former Executive Director, of the Washington Lawyers' Committee for Civil Rights. All of them have extensive experience in civil rights litigation and the provision of pro bono legal services by the private bar.

Over the past few months, we have witnessed a deeply alarming and unprecedented reversal of the federal government's commitment to civil rights enforcement, affecting virtually every federal agency charged with enforcing our Nation's civil rights laws. This wholesale retreat has encompassed not just a radical reduction of staffing in enforcement agencies, but the reversal of many fundamental and longstanding policy positions.

In the last few weeks, these shameful actions have been compounded by the attempts of the Trump Administration to coerce major law firms to make commitments to provide very significant quantities of pro-bono representation to clients approved by the Administration. While some firms have resisted this pressure, and several other firms have offered support to the firms that have been targeted, a number of other firms have chosen to acquiesce to the government's threats.

We believe this campaign to attack law firms in this manner represents an extraordinary threat to the legal profession and its ability to fulfill its vital role in providing essential legal representation to clients contesting critical denials of basic civil rights and civil liberties.

Especially in circumstances where federal civil rights enforcement is being radically curtailed, if not eliminated, we believe the need for private civil rights enforcement is more important than ever.

For nearly sixty years, the Washington Lawyers' Committee, assisted by more than one hundred area law firms and thousands of individual lawyers, has played a major role in protecting the civil rights of thousands of individuals in the District of Columbia and throughout the country. There is no doubt that unless vigorously contested, the coercive effort now being directed at major law firms will have a devastating impact on the ability and willingness of many law firms to maintain their vital commitment to civil rights advocacy.

We thus face a challenge unlike any we have seen in decades. The call to service issued decades ago by Judge Louis F. Oberdorfer, then in private practice, remains valid today. As Judge Oberdorfer famously said, "Our newly enacted civil rights laws will mean nothing without lawyers to represent those protected by these statutes." This statement remains as true today as it was in 1968, when the Washington Lawyers' Committee was founded.

In meeting the challenges before us, we urge all of our colleagues to do their utmost to answer Judge Oberdorfer's call today. We believe it is imperative that the law firms of our city and individual lawyers stand together against the threats now being made by the White House. In particular, we urge our colleagues to redouble their commitments to private civil rights organizations, in terms of both financial support and contributions of their firms' pro bono resources.

Past Co-Chairs Signatories

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