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Benchmark Litigation has recognized our Firm as the nation's Labor & Employment Law Firm of the Year for the third time in six years. I am so proud of our Firm, which has extraordinary attorneys doing extraordinary things every day.

In this newsletter, you will learn of our work supporting cadets in the U.S. Coast Guard who have been sexually assaulted; our work on behalf of members of the U.S. Army and Department of Defense who were sexually abused; our work on behalf of pension plan participants who have retirement savings with Southwest Airlines; our work on behalf of baggage handlers with wage and hour claims against Southwest Airlines; our work with the United States government attacking fraud at the border; our work that led to Leonard Peltier's clemency; our work that resulted in a great 4–3 Maryland Supreme Court decision supporting victims' rights; Schwanda Rountree's work on AI bias; and our spotlight on our partner, Saba Bireda, and the copious talents of Alok Nadig. More great things to come in 90 Days!

– David Sanford, Co-Founder and Chairman,
Sanford Heisler Sharp McKnight

Firm News

Labor & Employment Law Firm of the Year

In March, Sanford Heisler Sharp McKnight took home the 2025 Labor & Employment Law Firm of the Year award at the annual Benchmark Litigation Awards in New York City. Attorneys and staff from our New York office, led by Partner **Russell Kornblith**—himself a finalist for Benchmark's Litigator of the Year honor in Labor & Employment—attended the ceremony.



Front row, from left to right: Associate Caroline Hatley; Senior Legal Assistant Yuwen Wang; Partner Carolin Guentert; Partner and General Counsel Russell Kornblith; Senior Legal Assistant Lesly Gissell Zhicay; Senior Legal Assistant Annabelle Wang. Back row, left to right: Senior Litigation Counsel Kate MacMullin; Senior Litigation Counsel Alok Nadig; Senior Legal Assistant Talia Koltun-Fromm; Associate Susannah R. Cohen; Associate Miranda Katz.

Practice Area Case Highlights

Current Impact Litigation

Our Legal Advocacy for Military Sexual Assault Survivors

Our legal work pursuing civil claims on behalf of military sexual assault survivors continues to gain momentum under the leadership of Washington, DC Co-Managing Partner and Sexual Violence, Title IX, and Victims' Rights Co-Chair **Christine Dunn**. Christine's work to hold the military civilly liable as an institution for the epidemic of military sexual assault confronts the Feres Doctrine, a 75-year-old Supreme Court ruling that bars service members from bringing claims under the Federal Tort Claims Act ("FTCA") for "injuries [that are] incident to service." To this day, the application of Feres means that sexual assault is considered "incident to service."

The Supreme Court recently declined to revisit the Feres Doctrine. But Christine's strategic advocacy continues to push for legal and policy reform that protects survivors and challenges entrenched systems of power, while seeking civil recovery for each of her survivor-clients. Christine and the firm's work in two ongoing legal actions against the U.S. Coast Guard and the U.S. Army is highlighted below:

Does v. U.S. Coast Guard: On March 13, 2025, we filed seven new Federal Tort Claims Act ("FTCA") administrative complaints against the U.S. Coast Guard, the Department of Homeland Security, and its former parent agency, the Department of Transportation (collectively, "the Coast Guard") on behalf of former and prospective cadets who allege they were sexually assaulted while attending the U.S. Coast Guard Academy ("the Academy") in New London, Connecticut. At present, our firm is representing 29 former Academy cadets in FTCA administrative complaints—the first step toward filing a lawsuit for individuals with claims against agencies of the federal government. As first reported by CNN, the Coast Guard intentionally covered up and withheld from Congress a report titled "Operation Fouled Anchor" detailing decades of rampant sexual assault at the Academy and the Coast Guard's failure to adequately prevent, address, or investigate sexual assault of its cadets. The plaintiffs are represented by **Christine Dunn** and Associate **Jillian Seymour**.

Does v. Department of the Army: On March 3, 2025, we filed new FTCA administrative complaints against the United States Department of the Army and the Department of Defense (collectively "the Army") on behalf of 20 John Does, all of whom allege they were sexually abused by former Army Dr. Michael Stockin at Madigan Medical Center at Joint Base Lewis-McChord outside Tacoma, Washington. In total, our firm represents 42 John Doe plaintiffs with FTCA complaints against the Army. In January 2025, Dr. Stockin pleaded guilty in a military court martial proceeding to sexually abusing 36 male patients and the indecent viewing of five additional male patients. He will be serving more than 13 years in prison. We allege that the Army is liable under the FTCA because it was negligent in hiring, supervising, and retaining Dr. Stockin; lacked adequate protocols to keep patients and visitors safe from sexual abuse; and because the Army knew of Dr. Stockin's rampant abuse of patients but continued to allow him to practice. The plaintiffs are represented by **Christine Dunn**, New York Co-Managing Partner and Sexual Violence, Title IX, and Victims' Rights

Practice Group Co-Chair **Carolyn Guentert**, and Associate **Jillian Seymour**.



Christine Dunn



Jillian Seymour



Carolyn Guentert

Arthur Anderson and Manuel Rivera, et al. v. Southwest Airlines Co., et al.

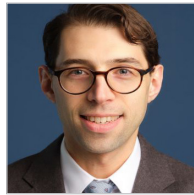
On January 28, 2025, Sanford Heisler Sharp McKnight filed a representative action in the U.S. District Court for the Northern District of Texas on behalf of the Southwest Airlines Co. Retirement Savings Plan (and its predecessors, collectively, “the Plan”) and approximately 60,000 Plan participants and beneficiaries against Southwest Airlines Co. (“Southwest”).

The Complaint alleges that Southwest has breached and continues to breach its fiduciary duty of prudence and due care under the Employee Retirement Income Security Act (ERISA) by failing to remove a chronically underperforming investment option, the Harbor Capitol Appreciation Fund (“Harbor Fund”), from the Plan’s investment menu.

Named as Defendants are Southwest, its Board of Directors, and the Committees and their members that manage or have managed the Plan. San Diego Managing Partner and Financial Mismanagement and ERISA Litigation Co-Chair **Charles Field**, Firm Managing Partner and Public Interest Litigation Practice Group Co-Chair **David Tracey**, and Senior Litigation Counsel **Sharon Kim** represent the Plaintiffs.



Charles Field



David H. Tracey



Sharon Kim



Michael Palmer



Andrew Melzer



Miranda Katz

Richard Strain and David Garner, et al. v. Southwest Airlines, Co.

In a separate litigation against Southwest Airlines, we are representing a proposed class of the airline’s baggage and cargo handlers in the U.S. District Court for the Eastern District of New York alleging pervasive wage law violations by the airline affecting hundreds of Southwest’s workers at airports throughout New York State.

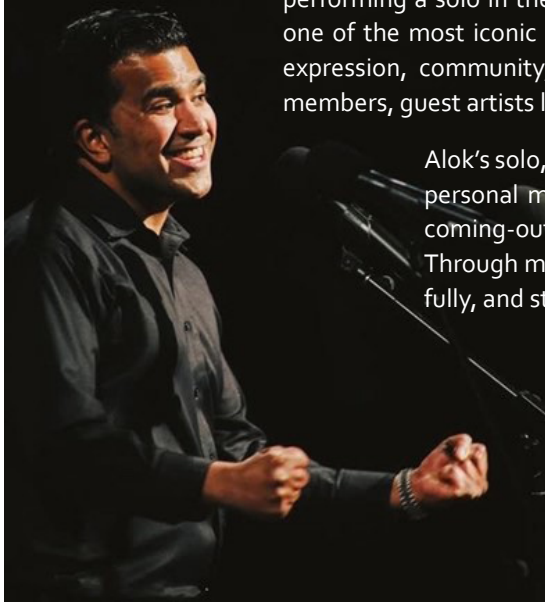
The Complaint, filed December 30, 2024, alleges that Southwest violates plaintiffs and the class members’ wage rights by paying them twice per month, when New York Labor Law mandates that workers who spend more than 25% of their time performing manual labor be paid on a weekly basis. Plaintiff Richard Strain works as a Southwest ramp agent at Long Island MacArthur Airport and plaintiff David Garner works as a ramp agent at Buffalo Niagara Airport. The lawsuit, which seeks more than \$100 million in damages, also alleges Fair Labor Standard Act (FLSA) violations against Southwest for failing to promptly pay its employees their earned wages. New York Co-Managing Partner **Michael Palmer** and Partner **Andrew Melzer**, Co-Chairs of the firm’s Wage and Hour Practice Group, and Associate **Miranda Katz** represent the plaintiffs and proposed class.

In Harmony: Music, Identity, and Advocacy

Senior Litigation Counsel **Alok Nadig** recently took the stage at the Cathedral of St. John the Divine, performing a solo in the New York City Gay Men’s Chorus’s spring concert, “Hear My Song.” Set in one of the most iconic cathedrals in New York City, the concert was a soaring celebration of self-expression, community, and resilience—featuring bold performances by more than 260 chorus members, guest artists like Our Lady J, and new works amplifying queer and trans voices.

Alok’s solo, the song “A Little Bit” from the musical “Crazy Just Like Me,” was a powerful personal moment in a program designed to be both intimate and defiant—honoring coming-out journeys while responding to the urgency of the current political climate. Through music, the performance asked audiences to listen more deeply, connect more fully, and stand in solidarity with those demanding to be seen and heard.

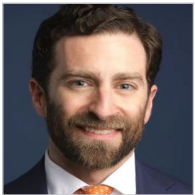
Whether on stage or in the courtroom, Alok brings the same commitment to visibility, dignity, and justice. His performance reflects a broader fight for LGBTQ+ rights—an affirmation that advocacy takes many forms. As anti-LGBTQ+ legislation rises across the country, Alok’s presence in the chorus underscores the power of community, expression, and resistance, reminding us that our pursuit of equality extends beyond legal arguments—it also lives in the stories we tell and the songs we sing.



On Our Radar: Legal Trends Ahead

Trump Tariffs and Customs Fraud

Whether real or merely threatened, the Trump Administration's expansive roll-out of tariffs means a continued bull market for whistleblowers reporting customs fraud under the False Claims Act ("FCA"). As Partner **Russell Kornblith** and Of Counsel **Shaun Rosenthal** observe in our [Working for Justice blog](#), the upward trend in the Justice Department's enforcement of the FCA against companies skirting import duties "should continue as the United States imposes more tariffs, and companies are forced to choose between paying the increased costs or risk being caught." Read about our firm's recent [\\$22.8 million whistleblower case result](#) against a vitamin importer, one of the largest settlements in an FCA enforcement involving customs fraud.



Russell Kornblith



Shaun Rosenthal

Shifting Markets, Shrinking Workforces

Layoffs are continuing to ripple across industries in early 2025, as employers navigate rising costs, adopt new technologies, and respond to changing consumer habits. For many organizations, this means reorganizing teams, automating roles, and scaling back departments that once felt secure.

As these workforce reductions continue, we anticipate a surge in questions about severance—particularly when it comes to who is entitled to it and under what circumstances. Some terminations raise legal issues, especially when part of a larger reduction or when severance is unexpectedly withheld. While companies are not always required to offer severance, certain circumstances—like mass layoffs or worksite closures—trigger protections under federal or state law.

To better understand your options and protect yourself during this time, explore our recent blogs: [Working-Class Rights: I Was Laid Off. Now What?](#) and [Steps to Take When Presented with a Severance Agreement](#).

AI and Employment Law: Schwanda Rountree Tackles AI Bias

Washington, DC Co-Managing Partner, Firmwide Co-Head of Litigation, and Discrimination and Harassment Practice Group Co-Chair **Schwanda Rountree** recently spoke at Howard University School of Law's Annual Law Symposium on AI bias, addressing how algorithmic decision-making can reinforce structural discrimination in hiring, promotion, and workplace management. Drawing from evolving legislation such as California AB 1008 and AB 2602, Schwanda explored how AI-generated data is reshaping legal frameworks around privacy, consent, and antidiscrimination protections.

In addition to her litigation work, Schwanda is contributing to the firm's internal AI initiatives, emphasizing the ethical use of generative tools in legal practice. Her thought leadership in this space reflects a deep commitment to safeguarding civil rights in the digital age and positioning the firm at the forefront of conversations around equity and emerging technology.

"Instances where protective measures are not being put into place is where legal battles surrounding discrimination, privacy, and consent could easily appear. State legislation is actively trying to get ahead of those risks balanced against the fast-paced advancements of AI."



Schwanda Rountree

Clemency Granted to Leonard Peltier

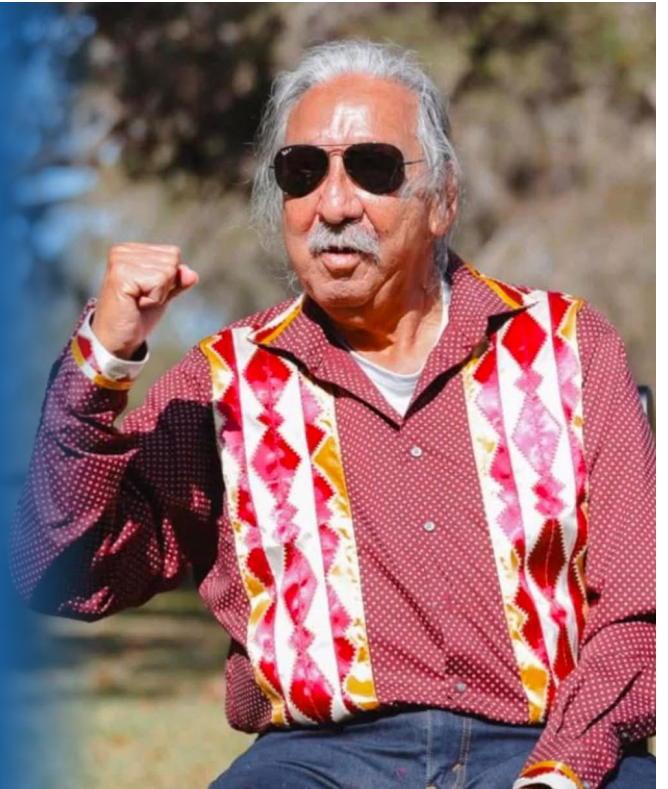
On February 18, 2025, Leonard Peltier returned home to the Turtle Mountain Band of Chippewa, in Belcourt, North Dakota, after being granted clemency the previous month by President Biden. Mr. Peltier entered prison at age 32 and was released at age 80—nearly 50 years of wrongful incarceration for the deaths of two FBI agents during a shootout in 1975 on the Pine Ridge Indian Reservation in South Dakota.

Since 2019, Sanford Heisler Sharp McKnight Co-Vice Chairman **Kevin Sharp** has represented Mr. Peltier in his petitions to be released from prison and into home confinement. "Misconduct by the government in the investigation and prosecution of

Mr. Peltier has been a stain on our system of justice," Kevin said. "Leonard's step outside the prison walls today marks a step toward his long overdue freedom and a step toward reconciliation with Native Americans."



Kevin Sharp



Our Advocacy for the Family of Hae Min Lee

Firm Chairman **David Sanford** has represented the Lee family in this wrenching matter since 2022, when he appealed a decision by the Circuit Court to vacate Mr. Syed's conviction on the grounds that the hearing violated the rights of Young Lee, Hae Min's brother. In August 2024, the Maryland Supreme Court upheld our appeal. The landmark ruling reaffirmed a critical truth: Victims of crime, and their families, have a right to reasonable notice of criminal proceedings, a right to be physically present at those proceedings, and a right to meaningfully participate at every stage of the judicial process. Our appeal helped ensure that Hae Min Lee's family—after years of pain and silence—was granted their rightful voice during the re-sentencing proceedings.

We always believed that the State of Maryland never had new information or new evidence that would call into question the integrity or validity of the original conviction. That belief was confirmed as true when Baltimore State's Attorney Ivan Bates filed an 88-page document with the Court on February 25, 2025, claiming that the State of Maryland's decision to move to vacate Adnan Syed's conviction was based on "false and misleading statements that

undermine the integrity of the judicial process." The Court, in other words, granted the motion to vacate the conviction under false pretense.

It was our Firm's advocacy that led to the reinstatement of the conviction, the Supreme Court decision, and the State of Maryland's confession of wrongdoing. The Court complimented **David Sanford** and **Sharon Kim** for their "*extraordinary advocacy*." On April 9, at the annual Maryland Crime Victims' Rights Conference in Baltimore, Mr. Sanford received the Vincent Roper Memorial Award from the Governor's Office of Crime Prevention and Policy in recognition of the significant impact on crime victims' rights forged by the Lee appeal.

Ultimately, the Baltimore City Circuit Court reduced the sentence of Adnan Syed under the Juvenile Detention Act and ended his prison term for the brutal 1999 murder of Hae Min Lee. Adnan Syed is now free but remains convicted of premeditated murder.



David Sanford



Sharon Kim

[Click here](#) to watch a clip of David Sanford addressing the media following a hearing in the case on February 27, 2025.

Attorney Spotlight: **Saba Bireda**



Saba Bireda

Saba Bireda is a Partner in the Washington, DC office and a Co-Chair of the firm's Discrimination and Harassment Practice Group. Prior to joining our firm, Saba was a member of the senior political staff at the U.S. Department of Education, including two years in the Office for Civil Rights for the Obama Administration. Read her full bio [here](#).

Q: What inspired you to pursue a career in law?

Saba: I am the child of an immigrant from Ethiopia and a 5th generation Floridian who grew up in the segregated South. I watched my parents overcome the persistent challenges of racism and xenophobia throughout their lives. The law was supposed to protect them, and in some cases, it did. I knew at a young age that I wanted to use the law to help others.

Q: What has been the most rewarding moment in your career so far?

Saba: I have been fortunate to have had many rewarding moments in my career, particularly during my time at Sanford Heisler Sharp McKnight. Back in 2016, when I first started at the firm, I led a team in drafting an amicus brief on behalf of more than 100 Democratic House and Senate members in the *Miami v. Wells Fargo/Bank of America* case before the Supreme Court. The case involved questions of standing under the Fair Housing Act. The late Tom Henderson, in whose name the firm established a civil rights fellowship for junior attorneys, was instrumental in supporting me and the team and I learned so much from him during that case and many others.

Q: What are you currently working on and why do you see it as important?

Saba: I am working on a case in which we represent a number of students who attended a for-profit career training program. They all attended the program seeking to increase their skills and have more career opportunities. Unfortunately, the promises the program made did not match reality and most of our clients left the program thousands of dollars in debt and without the training they were seeking. Our clients also experienced significant racial bias while in the program. I am working with a great team—Cara Van Dorn, Hilary Rosenthal, Zora Young, and Rachel Zhang, who have shown incredible dedication to the case and our clients.

New Associate

Christine Salazar recently joined the firm's Palo Alto office as an Associate. Prior to Sanford Heisler Sharp McKnight, she completed a clerkship for the Honorable Yvette Kane of the U.S. District Court for the Middle District of Pennsylvania and then gained litigation experience at a boutique law firm, representing consumers, members of the public, unions, and workers.



Christine Salazar

Christine currently works on matters that further the impact of the firm's Asian American Litigation and Finance Practice Group and Discrimination and Harassment Practice Group.

Recent Awards and Recognitions

Law360 has named Washington, DC Co-Managing Partner **Schwanda Rountree** to its 2025 Editorial Advisory Board for its Employment Authority publication covering legal news and analysis on the topic of discrimination law. Schwanda co-chairs our firm's Discrimination and Harassment Practice Group.



Schwanda Rountree



Carolin Guentert

New York Co-Managing Partner and Sexual Violence, Title IX, and Victims' Rights Practice Group Co-Chair **Carolin Guentert** was named an Emerging Leader by *Profiles in Diversity Journal*. The publication is dedicated to advancing diversity and inclusion by showcasing those with visionary leadership in their fields.

Nashville Managing Partner **Leigh Anne St. Charles** was recently recognized at the *American Lawyer's* Southeastern Legal Awards and named an On the Rise in Tennessee Honoree.



Leigh Anne St. Charles

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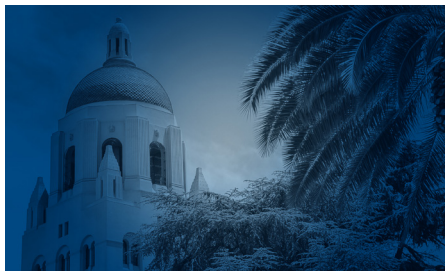
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