

Illinois Powerhouse: Willkie

By Celeste Bott

Law360 (September 28, 2026, 4:44 PM EDT) -- Willkie Farr & Gallagher LLP has parlayed a six-lawyer Chicago launch in 2020 into an operation with more than 130 attorneys, adding significant transactional practices while scoring high-profile results for clients such as Northwestern University, Google and Saks Global, earning the firm a spot as one of Law360's 2026 Regional Powerhouses.

Headquartered in New York City, the firm opened its Chicago office at the start of the global COVID-19 pandemic with six Jenner & Block LLP attorneys. Roughly six years later, attorneys at the location say it still has an "entrepreneurial" spirit.

"You know, the way I describe it sometimes to people is, there are few times that you get to make choices in life about who you are going to be with," said Craig C. Martin, Chairman, Americas. A person can choose their spouse, but not their children, parents or whom they go to college with, he said.

"So, in this environment, we actually chose each other, and it makes it different," Martin said. "This, the group of people that created Willkie six years ago in Chicago, and continues to build Willkie, and continues to come to Willkie — everybody's choosing it. It's very volitional. There's no inertia."

In the office's earlier years, the focus was on litigation, trials, investigations and appeals. It has since expanded by adding banking and finance, mergers and acquisitions, restructuring, and other transactional practices. Chicago partners now lead or co-lead the firm's global restructuring, class action, intellectual property, Employee Retirement Income Security Act litigation and private wealth practices.

"What is going on with us is pretty straightforward in the sense that the client base that we have has demands and needs, and our growth actually just simply reflects the demand from our client base," Martin said.

He said that one key to the office's success is the "superpower" it has when it comes to hiring. The firm is committed to diversity and inclusion in that process, Martin said, a practice he refused to dismiss as "something that's evil" in today's political climate. Top talent is attracted to Willkie's Chicago office because its attorneys practice law at the highest levels, in an environment that is intense and high energy, but also has an emphasis on collaboration and teamwork, he explained.

Tyler Born, who works in Willkie's corporate and financial services department and does a lot of



recruiting work for the office, said that as a younger partner, the firm stands out for the amount of support, trust and developmental resources given to lawyers looking to grow their careers.

"Other places that I've been at are seen as more kind of a top-down business development structure, whereas [at Willkie], there's a lot of devotion and effort in assisting senior associates, and some partners, and providing them the resources they need to grow their careers the way they want to grow, which is pretty special," he said.

That commitment to collaboration was illustrated recently by the firm's assistance with a foreclosure process in connection with a private credit lender's dealings with a business owned by a private equity firm, Born said. The business did not perform, and the lender wasn't getting its money, so a team of Willkie financing, corporate and restructuring attorneys was formed to develop an action plan, he said.

"So there, the lender now owns the business and is implementing improvements ... not only did they protect their downside that way, but they've also got a large amount of potential upside in the investment they made. So that was a cross-team effort all out of Chicago, which, you know, when I started five years ago, we would not have been able to do [here]," Born said.

Willkie attorneys have enjoyed a string of courtroom victories this past year, including a judgment for Pfizer Inc. in a closely watched COVID-19 vaccine patent dispute that was poised to become the first such case tried before a jury, a \$4 million settlement for Northwestern University to resolve a pandemic tuition dispute, and the dismissal of all claims against Univar Solutions — a global chemical and ingredient distributor headquartered in Illinois — in multidistrict litigation alleging a price-fixing conspiracy in the crop inputs industry.

As co-counsel for former lobbyist Michael McClain, who was tried alongside former Illinois House Speaker Michael Madigan on racketeering and public corruption charges, the firm helped secure a positive result when jurors failed to reach a verdict on any of the six charges against McClain, forcing a mistrial.

Illinois is a hub for privacy litigation, and the Chicago office has notched a series of victories in that space over the past year as well. Its attorneys secured dismissals with prejudice for major life insurers in two early cases brought under Illinois' Genetic Information Privacy Act, as well as a dismissal for Google in a novel proposed GIPA class action in the federal court in Chicago.

GIPA safeguards against the misuse of genetic information, barring companies from using it to make employment decisions and insurers from using it for underwriting purposes, such as determining coverage eligibility or calculating premiums.

Debra Bogo-Ernst, who chairs the firm's class action practice out of Chicago, said early GIPA cases tended to be filed against employers who collected family medical histories as part of their hiring process. When Willkie's life insurance clients began facing such claims, the team had to "think outside the box" and make the case that life insurers aren't covered by the law, she said.

"So we worked very hard to make that argument and to, you know, dig into legislative history like you were meant to do when you learned in law school," Bogo-Ernst said. "We really tried to get creative with it ... for our two clients. We got the dismissal. We were really excited about that, and since then, I think that kind of shut down that little leg that the plaintiffs bar tried to stand on in the life insurer context."

Bogo-Ernst moved to Willkie in 2023 after having formerly been the managing partner of Mayer Brown LLP's Chicago office. She calls that transition a "career-defining moment."

"It's sort of reinvigorated my desire to practice law long term. It's very energizing to come to a place where everybody wants to be here," she said. "It's just an energy. People like to be in the office. People like to be around each other. And you know, when you go to visit other Willkie offices, you get that same feeling. I mean, obviously, this one here in Chicago has been here now six years, so it's newer, and you get that kind of entrepreneurial spirit. But it's a piece of the culture too."

Eddie Best, who co-chairs Willkie's capital markets practice, also came over from Mayer Brown, and echoed Bogo-Ernst's sentiments.

"On the one hand, you have this incredible machine behind you with all these people and all this history, but on the other hand, we're a new entrant [into Chicago], so it's been a lot of fun," Best said.

On the transactional side this past year, Willkie's Chicago lawyers represented Henry Crown & Co. in its 2025 sale of food-processing equipment maker Provisur Technologies to KKR-backed Fortifi Food Processing Solutions. The office's restructuring team has also represented Saks Global in its Chapter 11 case and a related refinancing involving \$2.5 billion in debt.

A recent merger between Saks and Neiman Marcus created operational complications, and there was a large amount of debt to manage, said Ryan Blaine Bennett, who now chairs Willkie's restructuring group after joining the firm from Kirkland & Ellis LLP last year. Retail cases can be tricky, but the Saks bankruptcy, he said, was ultimately a "total success."

"We delevered the company, we got it out. Retail company cases don't always work out like that, right?" Bennett said. "So this is a great example of hard work, collaboration across the capital structure with the stakeholders, management and the advisers involved. So we had a great team on that to see the company through to a successful conclusion, and it's doing very well."

Other major Illinois-based clients include Ulta Beauty, which the firm is defending in six multistate email marketing class actions; retired boxer Mike Tyson's cannabis and lifestyle brand, Tyson 2.0; and Northern Trust Co., for which the office negotiated a settlement in putative ERISA class actions with nearly \$100 million at stake.

But for the Willkie attorneys who work out of Chicago, the engagement in the community goes far beyond handling key legal matters for companies or high-net-worth individuals. The office is rooted in Chicago civically, politically and through pro bono work, which most attorneys devote at least 20 hours to annually, Martin said.

A mantra in the office, according to multiple attorneys interviewed, is that they're not just from Chicago, they're "of Chicago."

"From the perspective of who we are and where we are and what we're trying to do as a collection of individuals, we are not just a law firm that has an office in Chicago, and there's an airport there," Martin said. "We are people who are deeply committed to the place in which we live and work."

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