

## In The News

# Early Prep Smoothed Dallas Firms' Transition To Remote Work

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*By Katie Pohlman*

Months before Texas cities and counties ordered residents to stay home to combat the coronavirus pandemic, Gray Reed & McGraw LLP was drafting a work-from-home policy, deploying equipment to support its staff, developing how-to guides and leading trainings on various video conferencing software.

The firm delivered equipment in waves, making sure staff had the computers, printers and internet connections needed to work from home, Mark Gargiulo, Gray Reed's chief operating officer, told Law360. The firm also introduced new policies allowing for remote work and accounting services to be completed without the in-person communications normally required.

"I am very much a planner," Gargiulo told Law360.

Gray Reed, which has offices in Dallas, Houston and Waco, finished its prep work about five days before a March 22 order from Dallas County telling residents to stay at home through the end of the month, which has now been extended through April 30. Harris County, which is home to Houston, and McLennan County, which includes Waco, issued similar orders March 24.

The firm monitored the outbreak in China and initially planned for some staff members to work from the firms' offices. But as the coronavirus spread globally — and was eventually labeled a pandemic by the World Health Organization in early March — the decision was made to operate fully remotely, Gargiulo said.

Dallas-based Munsch Hardt Kopf & Harr PC made similar preparations in January, when IT director Mike Furr started strategizing for a hypothetical office-closing related to the pandemic. He and his department scoured the firm for spare equipment to distribute to newly forming home offices.

"It was just a hunch on our part that we needed to be prepared," Furr said.

As the coronavirus encroached on the U.S., Texas firms worked with their IT departments and senior management to prepare employees for what would soon be the new normal. Many firms used their existing disaster preparedness plans — largely crafted for firms to cope with natural disasters like tornadoes and hurricanes — as launching pads, making pandemic-specific adjustments through January, February and the beginning of March.

Darrell Armer, Gray Reed's Dallas managing partner, told Law360 one of the biggest adjustments the firm made was tossing out the assumption that if one office shut down, the firm could rely on the other two to continue its work.

During natural disasters over the last few years — including Hurricane Harvey, other hurricanes in Houston and

tornadoes that have hit Dallas — the firm had mastered the two-offices-running model of data and disaster recovery, Armer said.

"We never contemplated we would be in a position to push our entire workforce to an at-home environment," Armer said.

Jackson Walker LLP IT department head Mark BeMent told Law360 the firm had completed tabletop exercises in the past concerning preparedness planning for pandemics. But those exercises never included the human factor, he said.

Coordinating a firm of 400 attorneys spread among seven offices statewide posed foreseeable problems with connectivity and server access that Jackson Walker could plan for, but also presented unexpected issues with technology knowledge and usage.

BeMent said in the days leading up to the stay-at-home orders, the firm's technology coaches in each office worked with lawyers and staff to familiarize them with the software they would soon rely on.

"You can only do so much" when planning, he said. "You can only paint 60% to 75% of the picture."

Looking back, BeMent said he is glad his department started preparing for the pandemic early on. It made ordering extra laptops and tablets needed for the firm to operate remotely easier. He thinks if the firm had waited any longer to prepare, it would have run into order backlogs and shortages for the laptops and tablets needed.

The law firms Law360 spoke with focused primarily on preparing support staff — who had almost exclusively worked from the firms' offices — to work from home and use new software. Most attorneys already had the knowledge and capability to work remotely because it was already a normal part of their work.

Like most firms, Jackson Walker has started using cloud technology and a "paperlite" business model by providing staff members with dual monitors and teaching them how to complete document markups and other edits in PDFs, BeMent said. The stay-at-home orders, though, added new concepts — like barcoding invoices — to the list of ways to reduce paper and enable more remote work.

Munck Wilson & Mandala LLP name partner Bill Munck told Law360 that his firm, which has three offices in Texas and one in Los Angeles, was able to jump to remote work easily because most of its staff already had the capability. But, more specifically, the Dallas office had a "dress rehearsal" for the coronavirus pandemic.

In June, the area had a streak of bad weather — including a microburst and multiple tornadoes — that took Munck Wilson's Dallas office offline for a week.

"Our entire database was shifted to Austin, and we were up and running. Everyone was able to work remotely," Munck said. "Unfortunately, it was a dress rehearsal for what we're going through today."

Munck said the IT department also runs regular network stress tests to ensure remote working capability, which allowed the firm to quickly adjust when the stay-at-home orders were issued. He said the IT department helped the firm stay ahead of the curve and avoid server and connectivity issues other firms are facing.

"When we no longer have to socially distance, we'll have a party for our IT guys," he said.

--Editing by Philip Shea and Kelly Duncan.

For more information, [click here](#).

## Primary Contacts



**Mike Furr**

Dallas  
214.855.7500  
[mfurr@munsch.com](mailto:mfurr@munsch.com)

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