

LAW WEEK

COLORADO

Law Firms Mull Return to In-Person Operations

Offices have flexibility to continue remote work, but details are still up in the air about specifics

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Even as state and local mandates to prevent the coronavirus’s spread gradually ease, law firms are evaluating how to return to in-person operations. Colorado designated legal services as essential businesses, but firms have found the ability to meet with clients and hold events remotely gives them some flexibility to continue working remotely past the end date of stay-at-home orders.

Jay Kamlet, the founder of the shared office space LawBank and a solo real estate lawyer, has kept the office open and left it up to the individual attorneys who use it to decide whether to keep coming in.

He estimated about 95% of LawBank’s members have chosen not to come in but added he hasn’t had anyone decide not to renew their membership, some of which are month to month.

“I’m pleased, one, for their sake, and then also for the strength of this community; they feel like they’re getting something still out of this,” he said. “The fact that I’ve got people who are reaffirming the community we’re building is very comforting to me.”

DeeDee Williams, the director of human resources at Davis Graham & Stubbs, said the firm has had a few people in its Denver office at a given time to take care of tasks that can’t be done remotely, such as handling mail. She said DGS plans to continue remote work at least through May.

“We will be re-evaluating in the later weeks of May what June is going to look like for us,” she said.

Beyond that, she said it’s not yet certain how the firm will decide who returns to work in the office and when. Williams echoed a sentiment common among law firms, which are finding that remote work hasn’t required sacrifices in efficiency or service. She said in light of balancing the firm’s operations with employee health and safety, “there wasn’t an immediate need to bring people back.”

Brownstein Hyatt Farber Schreck sent



BARB MICA

a statement on behalf of Barb Mica, the firm’s chief operating officer, about re-opening its 13 regional offices.

“Our priority continues to be the health and well-being of our employees and their families. Working together with our COVID Recovery and operations teams, we’re developing a plan and appropriate protocols to safely transition back to our 13 offices,” she said in the statement. “Our plan includes a phased-approach to our return to the office based upon scientific data about the virus’ decline and containment in our communities. And even though many of our cities are opening, we will continue to prioritize and emphasize remote work while these protocols and procedures are in development.”

Sherman & Howard also sent a statement on behalf of the firm’s chief operating officer, Brad Robbins. According to the statement, the firm began allowing some access to the office starting May 9 for employees who need to gather supplies to work from



JAY KAMLET

home. But they must wear face masks, complete a symptom checklist and report their temperatures on entry. Starting May 18, members and counsel can return to the office, while associates and staff will continue working from home.

Adjusting to remote work hasn’t been the only adaptation for firms. Many law firms and work spaces serve as a gathering or networking space for attorneys. Kamlet said LawBank has tried to help its members by continuing to host remote lunchtime seminars and recently held a few on financial planning. LawBank has also had sessions for lawyers to discuss how their practices have shifted because of client needs during the pandemic.

“Some people are pivoting to different practice areas that are in their wheelhouse but they haven’t focused on recently, like bankruptcy and guardianships,” he said.

Kamlet said transactional work concerning real estate purchases and financing



DEEDEE WILLIAMS

has ground to a halt. For the time being, his practice has shifted to advising clients in arrangements on leases and on arrangements between lenders and borrowers made necessary by COVID-19’s economic fallout. He said some business owners are having to grapple with the reality that their businesses won’t survive and need to figure out the real estate components of shutting down and filing for bankruptcy.

“It’s very reminiscent of ’08, ’09 and ’10,” he said, adding that because so much of the economy is on hold right now, he expects the full real estate fallout to be more of a delayed reaction than the market crash leading to the Great Recession. “But I perceive that loan workouts [and] more of these lease workouts; preparing for bankruptcy is going to be a big part of both real estate and general transactional practice going forward.” •

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