

McGlinchey Stafford Adds New Cannabis Chair In Seattle

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Heidi Urness joined McGlinchey Stafford on Monday after spending the past three years running her own firm. She told Law360 that she decided to make the move after receiving offers from a number of other firms because she found that the combination of quality attorneys and a national platform was perfect for building up her practice, adding that she found the attorneys at McGlinchey Stafford to show an authenticity she didn't find in some of the others she was considering.

"McGlinchey was the first firm with all the right ingredients that I thought would be successful in cannabis," she said. "Cannabis needs authenticity, people who actually care about you and not the billable hours. It needs diversity and forward-thinking, not old-school business practices. I felt that McGlinchey would give me a platform to jump off that would allow me to do more work."

While she was successful as a solo practitioner, winning awards from a number of cannabis-related publications, Urness said she ultimately chose to join a more prominent firm because of the unique nature of her practice, which is focused on state-level regulations as cannabis remains illegal on a federal level.

"There's a ton of states coming online with marijuana legalization and because there's no federal regulation yet, you have to be working state-by-state," she said. "It's very difficult to do that as a solo attorney and the number of continuing legal education hours I'd need to be licensed in every state would just be crazy. As the industry grows, I realized that professional service providers have to grow with it."

Urness, who graduated from the University of San Francisco School of Law, represents hemp-, CBD- and THC-related businesses, including business owners and operators, investors, banks and financial institutions, insurers, and industry and trade organizations.

She said that while her practice has been traditionally focused on licensees and retailers, areas such as transportation and product testing are fast becoming important aspects of the cannabis industry.

Because hemp was recently legalized on a federal level in 2018, Urness said that in that area, her practice has been able to develop in a more traditional sense, focusing on aspects and issues that regular consumer products would face.

“Hemp is federally legal and a lot of people are using it to develop things like clothes and construction. CBD is manufactured out of hemp as well and we’re starting to serve a lot of those individuals. Because they’re federally regulated, we’re getting to open up into interesting types of work like packaging, intellectual property claims and health and wellness statements. We’re starting to do a lot of interaction with traditional industries from this work.”

Before starting her own practice, Urness spent a little less than three years with the cannabis-focused firm Cultiva Law. She said she first became involved in cannabis law in 2015, a few years after Colorado and Washington were the first states to legalize recreational marijuana.

“I spent my whole legal career with the California Court of Appeals looking backwards 10 years, and I was really looking for something more forward-looking,” she said. “There were a lot of firms recruiting, and I think they wanted me because I would give them a bit of legitimacy with my court background. I ended up making the switch, and now we’re here on a national level.”

Comparing it to a child going through school, Urness said that the cannabis industry has made it through initial growing pains as it established itself as a legitimate business and now the main disputes and issues come from a business level, with entities challenging each other and starting to challenge the various laws coming into effect across the different states.

“When we first came online, it was like kindergarten,” she said. “Regulators didn’t know what they were doing, rules were coming up for the first time and for the first two to five years, I was spending a lot of time in administrative court. Now, they’ve worked things out, and we’re into junior high. Things are working out on an administrative level, but they’re getting complicated on a business level.”

Urness is the latest hire in what’s been a busy first half of 2022 for McGlinchey Stafford. Last month, insurance regulatory member **Lauren Ybarra** joined in Dallas and financial services member **Aaron Kouhoup** joined in Cleveland. Earlier in the year, member **Amy Greenwood-Field** and of counsel **Alexander Green** joined the firm, both in Washington, D.C.

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Heidi Urness