

Florida Powerhouse: Holland & Knight

By **David Minsky**

Law360 (August 23, 2023, 2:03 PM EDT) -- Holland & Knight LLP has long enjoyed a rapport with Florida's local communities, having planted its roots in the state more than a century ago, but last year, the firm was at the forefront as a wave of people moved to the Sunshine State, leading to considerable growth in several key litigation areas.

The firm employs more than 400 attorneys in separate regions of the state, but the fluidity among its seven offices facilitates teamwork that has led to results such as one of its largest-ever jury verdicts and the innovative use of cryptocurrency to serve a defendant — results that have landed the firm on Law360's 2023 Regional Powerhouses list as a Florida Powerhouse.

Reasons for Holland & Knight's success include mergers across state lines and acquiring and retaining the best talent, allowing it to easily match attorneys based on clients' needs, according to Wifredo "Willy" Ferrer, executive partner for Holland & Knight's Miami office. Ferrer emphasized Holland & Knight's Latin American reach, citing its offices south of the U.S. border and attorneys on the mainland who are fluent in multiple languages.

But Holland & Knight's commitment to its own community traces back to its founders, Peter Knight and Spessard Holland. Knight, a former mayor and state lawmaker, started his practice in 1889 after moving to Tampa. Decades later, Holland — a U.S. senator, Florida governor, county judge and World War I veteran — started his practice in nearby Bartow. Then, in 1968, the firms merged.

"Florida is part of Holland & Knight's DNA," Ferrer told Law360. "The firm is ingrained in Florida history and political landscape. We have been really laser-focused on hiring the best attorneys in servicing our clients throughout the state. That really does allow us to be a one-stop shop for clients who need any type of legal service throughout the state."

The integration of Holland & Knight's experience, industry knowledge and geographical presence in Florida is a key part of its success. This trifecta has led to the firm representing high-profile clients over the past year, such as the owner of the Tampa Bay Rays baseball team in a dispute with limited partners, and LCX AG, a Liechtenstein-based crypto exchange. The LCX lawsuit in New York stemmed from a cyberattack on the exchange, which had millions of dollars in digital assets stolen by an anonymous hacker.



To proceed with the case, however, LCX needed to provide the hacker with notice. Holland & Knight attorneys used a non-fungible token, a form of cryptocurrency, to serve the defendant. Even though the hacker was anonymous, Ferrer said Holland & Knight attorney Andrew Balthazor was able to find the person by sending a "service token" NFT to them along the blockchain.

One particular Holland & Knight case that stands out involves Norwegian Cruise Lines, which sued a Finnish supplier for selling unreliable ship engines. In that case, Holland & Knight brought the lawsuit on behalf of Norwegian, which ultimately resulted in a \$159 million judgment against the engine company — one of Holland & Knight's largest jury verdicts and the largest in the state of Florida for 2022, according to Ferrer.

"We brought that case on behalf of Norwegian Cruise Lines against the company that sold them unreliable propulsion systems for their ships," Ferrer said. "Law firms typically defend, but we brought that case."

Recently, Holland & Knight has been riding the wave of re-domiciling, with residents fleeing high-tax states such as California, Illinois and New York. This has led to a significant increase in work with high-net-worth families and considerable growth in practice areas such as corporate, litigation and particularly real estate, which are fueled by a demand in housing and domestic migration. Ferrer said he hasn't seen Florida this active in 30 years in terms of migration and legal activity.

Due to Florida's popularity, large companies such as Amazon and Target are making investments to cater to the population with distribution centers in places such as Miami-Dade County, Ferrer said.

Holland & Knight practices in nearly every area, Ferrer said, but the firm's historical "bread and butter" Florida practice areas are litigation, real estate and corporate matters. Lately, however, the firm has enhanced its teams in international arbitration and white collar defense, and has also handled several cases involving Paycheck Protection Program loan fraud, data privacy and security.

Ferrer cited reports by Bloomberg and Refinitiv showing Holland & Knight was among the top 10 firms this year in several areas, including private equity transactions and mergers and acquisitions, despite economic headwinds that resulted in a shrinking number of M&A deals so far this year.

Other growth sectors include health care and energy practice areas, Ferrer said, adding that Holland & Knight expanded its services as a result of strategic mergers with Texas-based firm Thompson & Knight LLP and Waller Lansden Dortch & Davis firm in Tennessee, both of which occurred over the past two years.

Along with the mergers, Holland & Knight has brought new hires with a variety of experience to its Miami office during the same time frame. They include Hilary Lane, formerly the chief privacy officer of NBCUniversal, who specializes in data privacy and cybersecurity law, and Danielle Garno, described by Ferrer as a national figure who services fashion and luxury clients, including the Miss Universe Organization,

Then there are several former government sector attorneys, including Amit Agarwal, previously Florida's solicitor general, who Ferrer said is an "incredible blessing"; Miriam Ramos, former Coral Gables city attorney; Luis Figueredo, who served as an in-house city attorney for Doral; and Alexandra Aguirre, who was added to help with Holland & Knight's corporate, M&A, securities and Latin America practices in Miami.

A Miami native, Ferrer himself was the former U.S. attorney for the Southern District of Florida, serving from 2010 to 2017 before joining Holland & Knight.

The firm also boasts a strong health care practice in Florida. Recent Holland & Knight honors include those for Roberto Pupo, who was recognized as 2024 Lawyer of the Year in health care law by Best Lawyers and partner Maria Currier, who was recognized as Health Care MVP by Law360 in 2022.

Community involvement doesn't only mean dealing with high-powered clients. One of Holland & Knight's core values is providing legal services to those who can't afford them. Ferrer said the Miami office reached its highest number of pro bono clients in 10 years during the COVID-19 pandemic. Other civic involvement includes contributing volunteers to local charitable organizations each year on 9/11 Day to "carry forward" a "spirit of unity and service that arose on 9/11," according to Holland & Knight's website.

"It would have been very easy during a pandemic to turn inward and focus on temporal profitability and let people fend for themselves, and we did the exact opposite," Ferrer said.

Holland & Knight also does criminal defense, having one of the strongest white collar defense practices in the country, according to Robert Grammig, who will become the firm's chair and CEO in Tampa as of April.

"We have former U.S. attorneys and state attorneys that are very sophisticated in high-profile white collar investigations, [U.S. Securities and Exchange Commission] investigations, you name it," Grammig told Law360, "whether it's a criminal proceeding or administrative proceeding."

With more than four decades at Holland & Knight, Grammig has experienced many challenges over the years, but said the law firm is now on a great path and is continuing its upward movement since the pandemic. Currently, it is focusing on taking advantage of the opportunity generated by the recent interest in Florida.

A major factor that makes Florida enticing to new residents is the lack of a state income tax. Industrialists, hedge fund owners and others with moneymaking enterprises are relocating their headquarters to the Sunshine State. Grammig said that has helped lift all boats in the state, not just Holland & Knight's.

He cited notable midmarket work, including a significant transaction for Clearwater-based MarineMax that involved the acquisition of several yacht basins and marinas, a transaction that had global implications and brought the company to the top of the charts in terms of high-end yacht facilities across the Mediterranean, Caribbean and parts of the U.S.

In other areas, Grammig listed "incredible expertise" in maritime and aviation litigation, lots of international arbitration and a strong government practice in Tallahassee. Holland & Knight's team includes former Florida Gov. Bob Martinez, a senior policy adviser whom Grammig described as "really amazing" — sharp and articulate in influencing regulation and legislation in the state.

"That's part of the reach we have," Grammig said.

South of the panhandle, Grammig distinguished between the work done in the Tampa and Miami

offices. In Tampa, there's more of an emphasis on the business side, with representing public companies and long-term privately held companies, whereas in Miami there's a tendency to do more private equity work, with lots of M&A. However, both offices do both types of work, he said.

A major transaction Holland & Knight takes particular pride in was advising Celsius Holdings Inc. on a \$550 million distribution deal with PepsiCo reached last year. Grammig noted that a fundamental aspect of the firm is that its business attorneys work in teams when representing larger clients.

Other than crypto, Holland & Knight follows emerging tech. Grammig told Law360 that his firm is closely watching developments in artificial intelligence and already seeking ways to wield its power. AI will fundamentally change how the firm accumulates and organizes data, in terms of research and providing legal services, Grammig said. AI will also add challenges; specifically, it'll call into question the billable hour, Grammig added.

"That doesn't mean you're not going to need human beings to negotiate deals or try cases," Grammig said.

Holland & Knight's success lies in its workforce, with more than 2,000 attorneys in offices across multiple states and countries, including a London office, which does work in aviation and maritime finance, and one in North Africa, which handles oil and gas finance. Grammig anticipates adding more attorneys and "more geography," particularly in Latin America, in the coming years.

Another reason Holland & Knight does well is a low turnover rate due to its corporate culture that builds on the underlying proposition of a collaborative and collegial environment, according to Ferrer, who also cited a very successful summer associate program that provides real-world training for attorneys getting started in their careers.

The community involvement, broad range of legal services and collaborative culture at Holland & Knight have made the firm a standout in Florida, Ferrer said.

"When you focus intentionally on creating a positive culture, that creates employee innovation and leads to growth and profitability," Ferrer said. "When people see you are a law firm that cares about making our community a better place, more people want to work with you."

--Editing by Linda Voorhis.