

Pro Bono and Public Policy

We proudly take on high-profile causes that draw the attention of policymakers in Washington, DC, as well as cases for indigent clients who need legal assistance in our communities.

The Power of Persuasion

It's not easy to change a judge's mind. Even a seasoned partner finds the task a challenge. Yet associates from Pillsbury achieved that feat in April 2018 to help a very special school stay in business.

New Roads School, in Santa Monica, California, has a mission of helping students from diverse social, economic, ethnic and racial backgrounds get a first-rate education. Pillsbury represented New Roads pro bono against claims that it had breached a promissory note of some \$8 million. Defeat in a jury trial at Los Angeles County Superior Court would place the school's existence in serious jeopardy.

The judge told our lawyers frankly that he believed their opponents had the law on their side. But then the associates assigned to the case worked with several partners to craft an argument about the interpretation of the contract in question. These efforts swayed the judge so completely that at the conclusion of the case, in response to the opponents' motion for a directed verdict, the judge rejected every argument against our client.

The jury then found unanimously that the school was within its rights under the relevant agreements with the lender. New Roads was saved.

Justice for Transgender Teen

Together with Lambda Legal, a team of Pillsbury lawyers achieved an important victory in July 2018 on behalf of pro bono client Drew Adams, a Florida high school student, in the first transgender bathroom case ever to go to trial.

Lambda Legal filed the case against the St. Johns County School Board on behalf of Adams and his mother in June 2017 in response to the school board's denial of Adams' access to the boys' restroom at Allen D. Nease High School because he is transgender. Adams, who began living openly as a boy in 2015, had used the boys' restroom when he started his freshman year without incident but after an anonymous complaint was made, he was told he could only use gender-neutral restrooms—a 10-minute walk from his classes—or the girls' restroom.

The Adams' lawsuit argued that the school board's policy to exclude transgender students from the restrooms that match their gender identity was unconstitutional because it discriminates based on sex, in direct violation of the Equal Protection Clause of the Fourteenth Amendment and Title IX of the 1972 Education Amendments Act. Ultimately, the U.S. District Court for the Middle District of Florida agreed.

“Drew Adams is just like every other student at Nease High School, a teenager coming of age in a complicated, uncertain and changing world. When it comes to his use of the bathroom, the law requires that he be treated like any other boy.”

—Judge Timothy J. Corrigan, U.S. District Court for the Middle District of Florida

Escaping a Homophobic Homeland

Life as a young gay man in the West African nation of Burkina Faso was a constant ordeal of persecution for George (a pseudonym for our pro bono asylum client). Family members, school teachers, neighbors and the police routinely administered beatings. In 2015, after a mob burned down his house, George fled his country. When he reached the U.S., he applied for asylum.

Pillsbury took on George's case in collaboration with Immigration Equality, a national LGBTQ

immigrant rights organization. Our lawyers worked hard to prepare the client for the most important interview of his life—an encounter with a U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services officer. Hours of preparation and strict attention to detail helped put our client in the best position to succeed.

After a successful hearing, George was granted asylum in February 2018. He has since been accepted at a New York City community college.

Securing Full Tribal Rights for the Cherokee Freedmen

A long-running dispute between the Cherokee Nation and descendants of people once enslaved by the tribe—also known as Cherokee Freedmen—culminated in September 2018 with a momentous victory for the Freedmen, pro bono clients of the firm. After more than 15 years of contentious litigation, including prevailing twice at the U.S. Court of Appeals for the District of Columbia Circuit, the Cherokee Freedmen are now recognized as full Cherokee citizens, entitled to full tribal political rights and benefits under the law.

The Pillsbury legal team prevailed on cross-motions for summary judgment in August 2017 when Judge Thomas Hogan of the U.S. District Court for the District of Columbia held that the Treaty of 1866 between the Cherokee Nation and the United States requires the Cherokee Nation to provide Cherokee Freedmen with the same citizenship

rights as native Cherokees. Following that ruling, the attorney general of the Cherokee Nation announced that the tribe would not appeal the decision and had begun accepting and processing Freedmen applications for citizenship. Our lawyers then secured a final judgment against the Cherokee Nation, thus cementing the citizenship rights of the Cherokee Freedmen.

Pillsbury also obtained from the U.S. Department of the Interior, which has oversight authority over the Cherokee Nation and other Native American tribes, commitments to help ensure the Cherokee Freedmen's equal access to federal Indian Health Services and other federal benefits administered by other tribes. The parties to the case then filed a joint stipulated dismissal on behalf of the Freedmen, resolving all remaining claims related to the case.