

Law Firm's Creative Touch Solves Toughest Issues

If there's one thing the firm Wiener Associates enjoys, it's winning a tough fight on behalf of clients. Through its unique mix of legal expertise, creative solutions, tireless work and nuts-and-bolts lobbying, the firm has won its share of battles over the years.

A satisfying recent victory came after a 2001 Executive Order eliminated funding for 41 school-based health centers, which provide services to children and adolescents without primary care. The budget-trimming move was a severe setback for the public health community,

how and coordination of the coalition's efforts, which included a major Capitol steps rally involving health professionals, educators and students.

"The locomotive was leaving the station," Wiener recalled, "but we were able to get it stopped when no one thought that was possible."

Gail Warden, CEO of Henry Ford Health System, was delighted—and impressed. "Restoring the funding was wonderful," he said, "but equally important, the firm educated the legislature on the importance of school-based centers."



(Seated) Elizabeth Wehl, Raj Wiener, Peter Ruddell;
(Standing) Debbie Rock, Melissa Purdy, Mary Van Halst.

Wiener Associates blends legal and political expertise to win difficult battles.

The firm's toughness and resolve have been apparent in other recent battles as well. The firm played a critical role on behalf of Northwest Airlines in the difficult and contentious, but essential, work of successfully establishing a new Airport Authority for Wayne County. And Wiener Associates found a way on behalf of its client, the City of Kalamazoo, to restore funding to a broad coalition of communities after a line-item veto to the Department of Consumer and Industry Services budget eliminated police and fire protection reimbursement grants to

which considers the centers an essential tool for improving the health of poor children and providing a non-threatening gateway to other community services. Most seasoned observers thought the situation hopeless, but the firm just went to work. When the dust settled, a \$359 million transfer package had been approved by both legislative chambers, circumventing the governor and restoring funding for this important service—a tactic most couldn't recall ever being done.

How did it happen? Partner Raj Wiener is quick to point out that a powerful grassroots coalition—including the likes of Henry Ford Health System and the Michigan Council for Maternal and Child Health—provided the political muscle. The firm provided the strategy, legislative know-

communities which host state facilities. This time the solution was a creative funds transfer through the Department of Transportation Budget.

Says Kalamazoo Assistant City Manager Dennis Durham, "Wiener Associates has been extremely effective

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for us in Lansing. A number of critical issues are at risk, such as retaining fire-reimbursement funding levels...Wiener Associates has had the energy and flexibility to address each and keep city officials informed as to the latest developments at the Capitol.”

The firm’s lobbyists say that looking for votes is often the most straightforward part of a successful lobbying strategy. Much harder is recognizing new and creative ways of addressing problems. “You don’t ever give up, even against long odds,” Wiener says. “You always look for one last way.”

With areas of expertise that include health care, education, transportation, the environment and appropriations, Wiener Associates has a diverse and growing clientele. Its three dozen-plus clients include corporate giants such as Northwest Airlines and GlaxoSmithKline, major health care providers such as Henry Ford Health System, and cities such as Kalamazoo and Madison Heights.

The firm came together in 1996 when Raj and Rick Wiener, partners in marriage, decided to merge previously separate businesses operations. Rick founded his firm in 1989, Raj in 1991.

Capitol Backgrounds...

Raj Wiener

Attorney; Director, Michigan Department of Public Health; Chief, Bureau of Health Facilities; Deputy Director, Department of Licensing and Regulation; Legislative Assistant, Congressman Bob Traxler.

Elizabeth Wehl

Attorney; Assistant Director, Michigan Council for Maternal and Child Health; Chair, Medical Services Advisory Council; Chair, Michigan Coalition for Children and Families.

Peter Ruddell

Attorney; Executive Assistant, Senate Majority Leader Dan DeGrow; Administrative Assistant, Rep. Randy Richardville; Executive Assistant, Sen. Joanne Emmons.

Raj, an attorney since 1984, began her lobbying career after serving as director of the Michigan Department of Public Health (now Michigan Department of Community Health). Rick, an attorney since 1976, had served more than two decades as a senior advisor to top elected officials and as a top organizer of more than 20 campaigns in Michigan before becoming a lobbyist. Rick recently left the firm to join the incoming administration of Governor Jennifer Granholm as chief operating officer for the State of Michigan.

Elizabeth “Betsy” Wehl, previously assistant director of the Michigan Council for Maternal and Child Health, became a partner this year after joining the firm in 1997. Peter Ruddell, formerly executive assistant to Senate Republican Leader Dan DeGrow (R-Port Huron), became the third attorney on staff when he joined last year. A fourth lobbyist, Melissa Purdy, joined the firm in 1999 and is currently working toward her law degree.

Both partners emphasize the importance of Wiener Associates being a law firm as well as a lobbying firm.

All three of the firm’s attorneys are skilled at crafting precise legislation and at representing clients during the complex and often arduous rule-making process that follows legislation.

Another example of the firm’s “full service” approach is the mastery of the Certificate of Need process it offers its health-related clients attempting to secure state approval for new facilities and equipment. The firm not only assists with the paperwork, it makes complex presentations to the Certificate of Need Commission on behalf of clients and,

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when appropriate, becomes involved in the drafting of fair and flexible standards for the necessary certificates.

Essential to the firm’s client relations is a mutually developed workplan. Time spent on the front end with a clear, written plan pays dividends later because it helps clients develop clear, realistic expectations and, ultimately, provides them with a basis for evaluating the firm’s performance.

Communication in a form desired by the client is also an important part of effective representation, says Wehl. “We don’t take a one-size approach to keeping clients abreast of our activities. We provide detailed written reports on the client’s schedule and can utilize phone, fax or e-mail—whichever is preferred. We’re also experienced at presenting before boards and at public meetings.”

As a law firm, Wiener Associates adheres to State Bar of Michigan standards regarding conflict of interest and resolution of potential conflicts. “This is the highest ethical standard of any governmental affairs consulting firm, and we do not take a client whose interests are in direct conflict with any other client,” Wehl emphasizes.

Lawmakers also appreciate the professional way the firm represents its clients in the Capitol.

“They are extremely professional, do their homework and have command of the details,” says House Floor Leader Randy Richardville (R-Monroe). “They don’t come to you with partial knowledge or only one side of the story...Some lobbying groups twist your arm, while others give you just one side of the story. Wiener Associates, however, gives you both sides of the story, while explaining at the same time why the side they’re on is right.”

Senate Floor Leader Sen. Bev Hammerstrom (R-Temperance) concurs. “We may not always agree on the issues, but they are always professional and prepared.”

With a growing clientele and some impressive victories, the inspiration/perspiration approach is obviously working. Gail Warden, for one, is not surprised. “Wiener Associates meets all of the criteria we have for an effective lobbyist,” he said. “They’re knowledgeable, accessible, have access to the right people and offer excellent advice on what we can reasonably expect to accomplish.” ❖❖❖