

## How Trump's crackdown on law firms is undermining legal defenses for the vulnerable

By Mike Spector, and David Thomas August 3, 2025 Reuters

When the Texas Civil Rights Project needed lawyers to help dozens of people arrested during U.S. President Donald Trump's immigration crackdown, legal director Dustin Rynders turned to a familiar strategy. He contacted major law firms that for decades had provided free legal services to nonprofits like his. On that April day in Houston, he called his usual contacts, many at firms that had previously handled challenges to Trump's immigration policies. Before Trump's return to the White House, they typically offered swift pro bono. This time, they all declined.

In March and April, Trump issued a series of executive orders targeting law firms he considers adversaries, the first such attacks by a U.S. president against the legal profession. Some of the orders lashed out at firms for donating their time to cases involving immigration, transgender rights and the January 6 attack by Trump supporters on the U.S. Capitol, claiming this legal work undermined U.S. interests.

Months later, the aftershocks threaten lasting damage to America's tradition of mobilizing free lawyers to challenge government actions on behalf of the vulnerable.

Dozens of major law firms, wary of political retaliation, have scaled back pro bono work, diversity initiatives and litigation that could place them in conflict with the Trump administration. Many firms are making a strategic calculation: withdraw from pro bono work frowned on by Trump, or risk becoming the next target. Fourteen civil rights groups said the law firms they count on to pursue legal challenges are hesitating to engage with them, keeping their representation secret or turning them down altogether in the wake of Trump's pressure.

Big Law firms have also pulled back sharply from litigation against the federal government. That's a departure from Trump's first term, when the nation's largest firms were often involved in challenges to his directives. Now, they're mostly on the sidelines amid an avalanche of lawsuits contesting administration policies spanning immigration, funding cuts to nongovernmental organizations and attempts to fire tens of thousands of federal workers.

The retreat has been painful for the nonprofit advocacy groups challenging Trump's sweeping assertions of executive authority, limiting their resources for researching legal arguments, preparing briefs and pursuing litigation. Such groups offer legal aid to low-income communities and have long relied on pro bono support.

The administration has defended its executive orders against Big Law as efforts to curb what it calls a "weaponized" legal system. Conservative activists and Trump allies have long asserted that major law firms lean too far left and use public interest law to advance liberal causes. Big Law's diversity policies, for instance, are a form of racial discrimination, they contend. Still, the crackdown is threatening a bedrock principle of the U.S. legal profession: that lawyers have a professional duty to help those who cannot pay.

Trump has exposed a weakness in the pro bono model by wielding executive power to retaliate against elite law firms for representing politically sensitive clients. His orders barred some attorneys from federal buildings, limited their access to officials and warned that their clients' government contracts could be at risk. The moves delivered a clear warning: Pro bono work could jeopardize the corporate clients that sustain big law firms.

The measures singled out law firms whose attorneys had investigated the president, represented his political adversaries or taken on causes such as immigration and voting rights that clashed with his agenda. One Trump order, for instance, cited a firm's previous representation of Hillary Clinton, Trump's 2016 election rival.[...]

A pro bono director at one leading law firm said the firm is declining to put its name on court J.B. Howard, a former Maryland deputy attorney general, resigned from Cadwalader in April after it entered into an agreement with the Trump administration. In an email to the firm's managing partner, Howard warned that "the legal profession, the courts and the rule of law are now under direct attack." He told Reuters his decision was "visceral," rooted in the oath he took to uphold the integrity of the legal profession. "What is more useless than lawyers if there is no functioning legal system?" Howard said. "As lawyers, we have a unique obligation to fight this."