Chief of the Month: Richard S. Schweiker, Jr., Virginia

Each month, the Center for Consumer Protection will provide an article about an Attorney General’s Office Consumer Protection Chief.

It is a great privilege to serve as Chief of the Consumer Protection Section in the Virginia Attorney General’s Office. I work with an excellent team of dedicated public servants. Each day, we are very fortunate to come to work with a primary purpose of helping other people. Thank you for the opportunity to share some information about our Section and my background.

I joined the Antitrust and Consumer Litigation Section (now called the Consumer Protection Section) as an assistant attorney general in April 1996 after several years on the litigation team of a large national law firm. In July 2000, I was promoted to the position of senior assistant attorney general. In January 2016, as part of a major reorganization and expansion of our Section, Attorney General Mark Herring selected me to serve as chief. As the new chief, I was tasked with overseeing and implementing the reorganization and expansion.

Our reorganization resulted in five units within the Consumer Protection Section. The Counseling, Intake and Referral Unit serves as the Virginia clearinghouse for the receipt, review, and referral of consumer complaints. Complaints are referred to the appropriate local, state, or federal agency; or they are handled by our Dispute Resolution Unit or our Section’s investigators. We typically receive approximately 4,000 consumer complaints each year. This Unit also responds to thousands of written inquiries from consumers. In addition, the Unit operates the Attorney General’s Consumer Hotline, which annually receives about 30,000 calls. Our Consumer Hotline staff are on the front lines – often the first to hear about new scams or other important consumer issues.

The Dispute Resolution Unit attempts to facilitate the resolution of consumer complaints that do not involve an alleged violation of law through application of appropriate alternative dispute resolution techniques, including facilitation, conciliation, and mediation. This is a voluntary process in which our dispute resolution specialists act as neutrals. Where a complaint appears to involve a violation of consumer protection law, the matter may be referred to a Section investigator, who may either attempt to resolve the complaint, or, where a pattern or practice of violations is found, work with Section attorneys to prepare a possible law enforcement action.
As part of the reorganization, Attorney General Herring wanted to focus on combatting predatory lending – so we created a first-of-its-kind Predatory Lending Unit and divided our attorneys and paralegals into three units with different areas of focus. Our Predatory Lending Unit investigates and prosecutes suspected violations of state and federal consumer lending statutes, including laws concerning open-end loans, payday loans, title loans, consumer finance loans, pawnbroker loans, mortgage servicing, and foreclosure rescue services. Our Charitable Solicitations and Deceptive Conduct Unit investigates and prosecutes suspected violations of the Virginia Consumer Protection Act, the Solicitation of Contributions law, and a plethora of other state and federal consumer protection laws. Our Antitrust Unit investigates and prosecutes suspected violations of state and federal antitrust laws, reviews mergers, and provides advice to state agencies on antitrust issues.

I am very thankful that Attorney General Herring’s expansion plan included an increase in staff. Since General Herring took office, we have doubled the number of attorneys in our Section. We also added paralegal, dispute resolution specialist, and support positions. Given the size of our state, we remain on the lean side, but the increase in staff and the dedication of hard-working professionals has enabled us to more effectively enforce our consumer protection and antitrust laws. We have more cases in active litigation now than at any time in the past 25 years. Our primary enforcement goals are to stop unlawful conduct and obtain restitution for consumer victims. In addition to combatting predatory lending, we also have focused on three groups of particularly vulnerable consumers: seniors, military personnel and veterans, and consumers facing language-barriers. We re-located one of our two Section investigators to Norfolk so that we could better serve the Greater Hampton Roads area and its large community of military personnel and veterans. We also recently hired a bilingual dispute resolution specialist to help us better serve Spanish-speaking consumers.

I feel fortunate to work in a capacity where I can help others. I was raised by two parents who were deeply committed to public service – instilling in my siblings and me that our purpose in life should be to serve God and others. My father served in World War II and lost his older brother in the war. He was motivated to run for public office based on that experience, his faith, and a genuine desire to make the world a better place. My personal and professional life has been shaped by my parents’ example of a commitment to faith, family, and serving others.

While my family is from Pennsylvania, I grew up primarily in McLean, Virginia. I attended Duke University and graduated with a degree in Public Policy Studies in 1989. I headed straight to law school at the University of Virginia and was married during the summer after my second year. Because my wife was attending medical school in Richmond and would be there for two more years after I graduated, I sought a job with a national firm in Richmond where I could get good experience and possibly transfer to another location within the firm depending on my wife’s residency. After graduating in 1992, I began work as an associate on the litigation team at Hunton
& Williams. I was fortunate to work on a variety of matters including complex commercial litigation as well as representing a Native American tribe in tribal court. After my wife’s graduation, we decided to stay in Richmond for her residency; and after the birth of our first child, I decided it was time to look for a position in the public sector. Luckily, a position opened up in our Section, and I began my tenure at the attorney general’s office in 1996.

I now have served under 10 Virginia Attorneys General and have handled a variety of consumer protection enforcement cases during nearly 23 years in the Office. Some of my more significant cases involved telemarketing fraud and charitable solicitation fraud. In a seminal charitable trust case involving the wrongful appropriation of a nonprofit hospital, we were able to recover over $57 million and used $41 million to create the Northern Virginia Health Foundation, whose continuing mission is to improve the health and health care of residents of Northern Virginia with a particular emphasis on the needs of the uninsured. I also have appreciated the opportunity to draft various pieces of state consumer protection legislation, including the Virginia Telephone Privacy Protection Act.

On a personal note, my wife is a pediatrician and we have three kids – one who graduated college last year, one who is in college, and one who will be in college next year. I enjoyed 15 years of coaching dozens of soccer, baseball, and basketball teams. With my coaching days over, I have been serving as the president of the athletic boosters at my kids’ high school for several years. I am active in my church having served as church council chair and in various other capacities including teaching and leading my adult Sunday School class for nearly 20 years.