Chief of the Month: Deborah Hagan, Illinois

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

I joined the Illinois Attorney General’s Office in 1982 as an Assistant Attorney General in the Consumer Fraud Bureau. I have served under 5 attorneys general and have worked in the Consumer Protection Division for over 36 years. Since 2004, I have headed up the Consumer Protection Division which includes Consumer, Charitable Trust, Franchise, Health Care, and Veterans’ and Servicemember Bureaus. I supervise approximately 40 lawyers and at least that many more non-attorneys who handle consumer, health care, and veterans’ complaints as well as process charitable trust and franchise report filings.

The Illinois Attorney General’s Office engages in an informal dispute resolution process with companies on behalf of consumers with complaints about their transactions, health care, or veterans/servicemember rights. We receive up to 35,000 complaints per year and register over 35,000 charities and franchises each year. The Division has a number of hotlines to assist our citizens including: Consumer, Spanish, Identity Theft, Mortgage, Student Loan, and Veterans and Servicemember hotlines.

The mission of the Consumer Division is to protect the consumers of this state through various means including advocacy, education, consumer complaint resolution, legislative proposals, and law enforcement actions including multistate investigations and settlements.

I believe the most challenging time of my career was when the Financial Crisis of 2008 hit and citizens in large numbers were losing their homes to foreclosure. In response, in 2008 we sued Countrywide, the largest originator of mortgages in the country, for originating mortgages that consumers could not afford. We subsequently broke new ground and sued Bank of America and Wells Fargo under our Human Rights Act for originating loans that discriminated against borrowers of color. As part of a multistate which Illinois helped to lead, we negotiated a $25 billion settlement with five national banks for failing to properly service mortgage loans including offering loan modifications to struggling borrowers. In addition to borrower relief for Illinois consumers, Illinois received over $100 million to remediate the effects of the financial crisis.
crisis. We have granted out $20 million to legal assistance, $5 million for court foreclosure mediation programs, and $70 million for the rehabilitation of homes around the state and the process is ongoing.

On the recent legislative front, we are proud to have passed a new two week warranty for used cars after years of used autos primarily being sold “as-is.” We just passed a Student Loan Bill of Rights with strong borrower protection servicing standards for student loan servicers.

It has been an honor to serve in this position. I have told many new lawyers that there is no better legal job out there even if the salaries are not high. This is a career path in which you can make a difference for your communities, your state, and your country. There are constantly new marketplace developments for us to study. We must ensure that there are protections for consumers as new products and technologies come on to the scene. I have a fantastic staff who are bright and dedicated and do great and meaningful work. The two Consumer Bureau Chiefs, Susan Ellis and Beth Blackston, will be among the leaders of consumer protection of the future.

And finally, I work for Attorney General Lisa Madigan, who is not running for another term, but who has been a tireless advocate for the citizens of Illinois and has been an inspiration to me and her staff to always do the best we can for to bring fairness and justice to the people we are charged to protect.

On a personal note, I have 4 children and 5 grandchildren under 5 with whom I love spending time. I serve on the Board at my church as well as my church’s Social Justice Committee. I enjoy yoga classes and sitting with my Zen mediation group which both come in handy with my career choice!