Chief of the Month: Cholla Khoury, Assistant Attorney General and Director of the Consumer and Environmental Protection Division, New Mexico Attorney General’s Office

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

During this uncertain time, when our citizens are at their most vulnerable, the work we do in the consumer protection world is critical both to the well-being of our citizens and the successful reemergence of our economies. It is humbling to be asked to write about consumer protection as the critical importance of this topic is garnering more attention than ever before. However, the current crisis doesn’t change the underlying principle that bad business is bad for everyone: consumers; businesses trying to do the right thing; and our economies—both statewide and nationally.

As I expect is true for many of us, the chance to help protect the vulnerable and make our world better is what originally drew me to the Office of the New Mexico Attorney General in 2010. I started with the office doing general civil defense, special writs, administrative prosecutions, tobacco litigation, and _qui tam_ work in our Civil Litigation Division. In 2014, I joined the environmental side of the office as the state utility consumer advocate. In 2016, Attorney General Balderas combined the office’s environmental and consumer divisions into the Consumer and Environmental Protection Division (“CEPD”), a name as long as it is apt, and asked me to step in to lead it.

While at first these two areas appear odd bedfellows, another way of thinking of CEPD is that of an affirmative civil litigation division. Thus, most of New Mexico’s enforcement actions and plaintiff’s work comes from CEPD. Under CEPD, the office houses its home ownership protection program, charities registration and enforcement, consumer protection, environmental enforcement, antitrust, securities, utilities consumer advocacy and _qui tam_ litigation.

New Mexico is a small state where one person really can make a difference; I’ve always been driven by that. I have been extremely fortunate to have built a team of like-minded individuals who are truly driven to serve the public. From our consumer advocates protecting people’s
homes to our litigators picking fights with some of the biggest companies in the world, and everyone else on my team, every one of us is driven to protect New Mexico. While our division is relatively small, we do not shy away from the big, important fights. I like to think my team is small but mighty!

The lawyers on the other sides of those fights will sometimes describe the Attorney General’s office as “a great place to get some experience” or a place to “get your feet wet.” I just nod and smile because like many of my fellow consumer protection attorneys around the country, even after I got my feet wet, there is no place I would rather be. The depth of experience in our consumer protection community demonstrates that for many of us, this is not just a place to get experience, but a life-long calling. In our offices we deal with our states’ most complex and important matters. Being part of the national consumer protection community has only reinforced this for me. The support and willingness to share knowledge amongst the states only raises the bar for enforcement—ensuring that fraudsters, scammers, and in CEPD’s case, polluters, have nowhere to hide.

I appreciate the opportunity NAAG has given me to address our consumer protection community, and I look forward to continuing to work with all of you to make sure we maintain strong, consistent enforcement across our nation.