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LAWYERS
WHO LEAD
BY EXAMPLE
2015 AWARDS

**PRO BONO:
INDIVIDUAL**

ROPES & GRAY

WILLIAM SUSSMAN

IN EARLY 2012,

when Ropes & Gray partner William Sussman agreed to help the Legal Aid Society on a landmark class action on behalf of inmates brutalized by guards at Rikers Island, he knew he and his firm had a tremendous amount of work ahead.

“I could just tell this was going to be a massive undertaking,” said Sussman, who co-chairs Ropes & Gray’s pro bono committee and is one of the firm’s leading commercial litigators.

He was right. Between mid-2012 and this past summer, the firm put in more than 30,000 pro bono hours on the case—*Nunez v. City of New York*—with a team that included at least 30 lawyers and a dozen paralegals.

Sussman’s chief job was supervising the effort, though he recalled spending hundreds of hours and countless late nights working on letters to the court and on what seemed like “motion after motion after motion” as a long series of battles over discovery broke out.

Ultimately, Rikers officials were forced to turn over more than 2 million pages of documents and electronic records and make dozens of witnesses available. In late June, lawyers for the city agreed to a sweeping consent decree to settle the



matter that requires Rikers to institute strict “use of force” policies and training programs, as well as install thousands of

video surveillance cameras in order to curb inmate abuse.

The settlement must pass final muster at an Oct. 21 fair-

ness hearing in federal court. But Legal Aid Society lawyer John Boston is optimistic that the proposed reforms, which include a court-appointed monitor, will be implemented.

Boston said Sussman deserves a large share of the credit for keeping the litigation on track: “He was indispensable.”

Sussman, for his part, is optimistic that the agreement not only will curb violence against Rikers inmates, but also will have an impact beyond New York. “My hope is that it will be used as a best practices model around the country,” he said.

And he was grateful to have played a role in that effort. “This was the ultimate underserved population,” he said, referring to the plaintiffs in the *Nunez* case.

Nunez is only one example of Sussman’s commitment to pro bono. He has used his position as co-chair of the pro bono committee to increase attorney engagement, build partnerships with pro bono providers, and developed internal firm expertise to match the needs of partner nonprofits so they can direct their resources to helping others.

“As lawyers, we’ve been given much,” he said. “Giving back is what we’re supposed to do.”

—Susan Hansen

ROPES & GRAY