

Kramer Levin Adjusts 'Nimble' Summer Program Amid COVID

By **Anna Sanders**

Law360 (June 8, 2022, 4:21 PM EDT) -- Kramer Levin Naftalis & Frankel LLP thought this year's summer associates would see the firm's first in-person program since the pandemic began — but coronavirus had other plans.

The BigLaw firm pivoted after cases spiked in New York just before the summer program started three weeks ago, opting for virtual trainings, and a more flexible approach to events and work in response to health data and feedback from participants.

"We were planning to be fully in-person," Kramer Levin chief legal talent officer Lauren Tapper told Law360 Pulse on Wednesday. "The rule books that we've used in the past to tweak things are thrown out the window, and now we're looking at everything with fresh eyes and fresh perspective."

The fluid nature of Kramer Levin's program this year highlights a new normal for the legal industry with law firms across the country constantly adjusting their plans for summer associates, in-office work and more as coronavirus cases continue to spread more than two years into the pandemic.

When Kramer Levin began planning for 2022 summer associates last fall, the firm outlined three different scenarios: a program that would be fully in-person, completely remote or a hybrid mix of both.

"We were anticipating that we could be fully in-person, so we weren't really planning for anything outside of being in the office," Tapper said of those fall plans. "Things were getting better ... and then they [coronavirus cases] started to pick up again."

In New York City, where Kramer Levin is based and the summer program takes place, COVID-19 cases and hospitalizations from the virus are down so far this month. But the weeks before the summer program began at the end of May saw an uptick in cases. Additionally, the city health department's coronavirus alert level remains "high," with officials still recommending people wear masks indoors due to "high community spread" and "substantial pressure on the health care system."

As the program's start date grew closer, the firm anonymously surveyed their 18 summer associates on their preferences, eventually designing a hybrid itinerary for the 10-week program that Kramer Levin said may change at anytime.

"We surveyed them in terms of the type of activities and the type of comfort level they had with being in-person with people, whether they preferred outdoor social events, in-person trainings, virtual

trainings," Tapper said. "Once you really had a sense of their comfort level, it really put the meat on the bone in terms of what our summer program would look like from that perspective."

Social events organized for summer associates may be held outdoors or allow for smaller groups to avoid crowding and help stop the spread of coronavirus, including bocce in Central Park and a bus tour of prominent city buildings the firm's real estate and land use groups have worked on. The work day is hybrid, including some in-office days and some remote, and all live programs or trainings have optional Zoom links.

"We wanted to have an option for connectivity available for every event in every training that we're having because, if someone does become sick, one of the most important things that you want to do is make sure they're not missing out," Tapper said. "The summer program is only 10 weeks, so we want to make sure that everyone participating makes the most of it."

Tapper said the flexibility required for summer programs during COVID-19 might remain even after the pandemic ends. On Fridays, for instance, Kramer Levin summer associates can work remotely.

"It's really nice for both the summer associates and the attorneys to have flexibility," she said. "In days past, summer associates were expected to be in unless they were not in the office because they were not feeling well."

The firm's program was fully remote in 2020 and was also virtual last year, though Kramer Levin allowed 2021 summer associates to have office space if they wanted through a "hoteling" option.

"We heard last year that it was great to have the flexibility to come in, but it was even better when they had the opportunity to truly engage with people and have those opportunities in meetings, so we really structured that into our program this year," Tapper said.

The firm mapped out every single day of the 10-week program to ensure adjustments could be made if necessary, including making some events virtual or separating summer associates into smaller groups for other events. Last week, the firm canceled an in-person lunch and plans to reschedule it to be in an outdoor setting.

"We may decide, as things get better, that perhaps we're more comfortable dining indoors and then we pick different venues," Tapper said. "We are definitely nimble ... The most important thing is to ensure that we're listening to what everybody's preferences are and trying to incorporate that in a manner that makes sense to keep everybody healthy."

--Editing by Lakshna Mehta.