

Greenberg Traurig Warsaw Office Mobilizes For War Refugees

By Emily Lever

Law360 (March 14, 2022, 3:13 PM EDT) -- Some 150 miles from the Ukraine-Poland border, Lejb Fogelman, a partner in Greenberg Traurig LLP's Warsaw office, is losing sleep not over an upcoming merger but about sending supplies to Ukrainians fleeing the war.

The firm's 100-lawyer, 200-employee office in the Polish capital has been working "basically full time" on providing relief to Ukrainian refugees ever since Russia attacked Ukraine in late February. An estimated 1.5 million Ukrainians and counting have fled their country since the war began, and ad hoc structures in neighboring countries are struggling to keep up with need, especially in the dead of winter.

"This is the eye of the storm," Fogelman told Law360. "We basically almost dropped our regular duties and just focused on this. Obviously, we have to do some work, but to the extent we have free time, we pick up refugees, we bring them here."

Though the refugees and local Polish people don't speak the same languages — finding Polish-Ukrainian and Polish-Russian translators is another item on an endless list of needs — arriving women, children and elders are impossible to ignore. Few of the refugees are men because the Ukrainian government has held them back to fight.

"I think the bulk of the burden fell on us because we're next door," Fogelman said. "Most people think it is a distant thunder, it is somewhere else. What's difficult to understand is you're sitting here and 200 miles away from you people are being pounded into dust, nuclear power plants are being bombed."

Assistants at the firm are housing refugees in their own apartments, all while donated food, clothing, blankets, towels and menstrual products pile up in the hallways to be packed into cars and driven to the border. A few employees have set an example and inspired the rest, Fogelman said, citing partner Robert Lis, who took five refugees into his small apartment. Lis currently spends his days seeking out donations of food and medical supplies and appealing to local mental health professionals to provide free care to traumatized refugees.

"Our office email in Warsaw is going off every minute: 'Does anyone have baby shoes in this size?' 'Does anyone have women's clothing in this size?' I'm very proud of our office," Fogelman said.

The refugee relief efforts feel particularly personal to Fogelman, a Polish Jew who grew up in Warsaw before leaving as a refugee in 1968. He didn't expect to return, much less to see new groups of refugees arriving at his front door from Ukraine.

"Having been a refugee, I feel a special call," Fogelman said. "The feeling to abandon everything to which you belong with nothing with you is a feeling that gives you a sense of duty."

Fogelman arrived in the U.S. as a stateless person with "literally zero dollars," and he was taken in by refugee relief organizations. Now, the shoe is on the other foot as he assists newcomers to his homeland.

"If I were in the U.S., maybe I would just be like the others — 'OK, we feel bad for you, here's some money,' and so on and so forth. But I am not. I'm here," he said. "I am losing my health because it's stressful to see people suffer. I'm not able to be indifferent."

But no matter how hard a few hundred or thousand passionate individuals work to help refugees, Fogelman cautioned, these efforts aren't sustainable. Individual and corporate solidarity can't replace deliberate action by countries — not only Poland but also richer European Union member states whose leaders have expressed solidarity with Ukraine.

"The French and the Germans and everybody who is so loud about how they pity those Ukrainians — I don't see them here," Fogelman said. "Volunteers should help to give people hope and a nice word and to make people feel welcome, but what is really needed is to give people homes, hospitals, schools, infrastructures."

"We are already at the limit," he added. "We are a small organization, it's an amazing organization, but this is something that needs to be systematically resolved."

--Editing by Steven Edelstone.