

New Jersey Powerhouse: Chiesa Shahinian

By **Nick Muscavage**

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Chiesa Shahinian & Giantomasi PC has served as the lead in several high-profile New Jersey cases over the past year, spanning the consolidated litigations of sexual assault claims at Edna Mahan Correctional Facility for Women, the Title IX case against William Paterson University and the development of American Dream, the second-largest shopping mall in the United States.

The West Orange-based firm, which is celebrating its 50th anniversary this year, was able to provide competent guidance to its clients in these high-exposure matters by relying on its team of attorneys that includes a throng of former prosecutors and retired jurists, landing it among Law360's 2022 **New Jersey Powerhouses**.

Chiesa Shahinian has a deep roster of attorneys in its home state. Of the firm's 178 attorneys, 163 are based in New Jersey.

The firm has come a long way since its founding as Wolff & Samson in 1972 by Joel A. Wolff and David Samson, the latter of whom served as the New Jersey attorney general and later as the chairman of the Port Authority of New York and New Jersey before **pleading guilty to a federal bribery charge** in 2016.

Over the past decade, the firm has rebranded to Chiesa Shahinian, brought in about 50 attorneys and, as of last year, announced the **opening of a new headquarters** in Roseland.

"Our growth is not by accident," said Chiesa Shahinian managing member Patricia Costello, a retired state Superior Court judge who served as Essex County's assignment judge. "It's very well-thought-

out and well-planned, and has been going very well. We're very happy with where we are now."

She said the firm has expanded several practice groups over the past year and brought on multiple high-profile laterals, such as Emil Bove, the former co-chief of the national security unit at the U.S. Attorney's Office for the Southern District of New York.

The firm's team of former prosecutors provides a unique insight when handling complex cases, such as when the firm served as counsel to the New Jersey Department of Corrections in the consolidated sexual assault litigations related to Edna Mahan, the state's only all-women prison.

The case "was a very significant matter," according to Jeffrey Chiesa, a former New Jersey attorney general who serves as a member of Chiesa Shahinian's executive committee.

"There was widespread abuse going on," he said. "We obviously had all kinds of very difficult legal issues and had very difficult atmospheric issues because of the way these women had been treated over a long period of time."

The Chiesa Shahinian team guided the state Department of Corrections to a March 2021 agreement, which included a \$20.8 million global settlement of consolidated class and individual civil claims of sexual abuse and harassment of inmates at the prison. The settlement resolved the consolidated claims of 22 individual plaintiffs and two proposed classes consisting of all inmates since 2014.

"Because of the expertise of the lawyers and their investigative backgrounds — lots of former assistant U.S. attorneys — this is the kind of thing we're really well-suited to get involved in," Chiesa said. "Because of the experience of our lawyers, we were able to land this in a fair spot from the state's perspective and the victims' perspective."

Chiesa Shahinian was also involved in another delicate matter relating to sexual assault claims: defending William Paterson University against Title IX and Section 1983 claims arising from the university's criminal and disciplinary investigations of an alleged five-on-one sexual assault in a dormitory, which resulted in the expulsion of two students.

The firm obtained a complete dismissal with prejudice of the federal claims on summary judgment on behalf of the university, which is awaiting a decision before the Third Circuit. In February, the university received summary judgment in the state litigation, dismissing all counts with prejudice.

"This was a horrifying incident that occurred," Chiesa said. "The issue became whether or not it was reasonable for the William Paterson folks to have made an arrest."

Both the state and federal courts found that the university did have probable cause to make the arrests, Chiesa said.

William Paterson feels "very good" about the results, Chiesa said, but most importantly, "the professionals that were involved in addressing this situation feel the same way, as well."

The firm also displayed its prowess in complex development matters over the course of past year.

The American Dream is the largest mall constructed in New Jersey — the second-largest in the country behind the Mall of America — and Chiesa Shahinian played a leading role representing its owner, the Triple Five Group, which also owns the Mall of the America, in the mall's development and operation.

"This has been a longstanding matter within our firm," said Frank Giantomasi, a member of the firm's executive committee and real estate, development and land use group.

The representation has touched on multiple areas, including corporate law, real estate, government, environment, sports and financing, among others.

The firm took a "generalist approach" to the project, Giantomasi said, and had about 14 attorneys working on it over the past several years.

"It shows the firm's breadth of effectiveness," he said. "We're really kind of compartmentalized, but we integrate extremely well so we don't have to bring in other firms. Clients like that because there's no learning curve that has to be re-established."

Giantomasi also highlighted Chiesa Shahinian's work as the redevelopment and land use counsel to LEG-BP Bayonne in its development of a 152-acre plot in Bayonne. The agreement between the Port Authority of New York and New Jersey and Chiesa Shahinian's client will result in 1.2 million square feet of warehouse space and an estimated 2,700 jobs.

LEG-BP Bayonne closed on the property in 2021, with the help of Chiesa Shahinian's guidance.

"This, again, took sophisticated negotiation tactics and an understanding of the port's operating paradigm," Giantomasi said.

The firm, he said, had to be creative to achieve the results for LEG-BP Bayonne.

The project serves an example, according to Giantomasi, of the firm's dedication to its clients and "our ability to navigate the intricacies of business and government."

--Editing by Steven Edelstone.