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Elkhatib builds on political ties

Working in Daley administration helps in new position with construction group

BY ROY STROM
Law Bulletin staff writer

When Khaled J. Elkhatib took on his current general counsel role, he said he knew more about handling foreign diplomats than he did dealing with Hispanic construction workers.

That began to change in the span of a year.

After leaving his role as deputy director for international relations in then Mayor Richard M. Daley's office in 2011, Elkhatib now helps 300 Hispanic construction companies with anything from saving \$900,000 to drafting nondisclosure agreements in his role as the lone lawyer at The Hispanic American Construction Industry Association (HACIA).

"When people ask me, 'How did Khaled Elkhatib end up at (HACIA)?' I remind them that the world comes down to relationships," he said.

Jorge Perez, executive director of HACIA, said the nonprofit advocacy organization provides state and city lobbying for its members, a range of construction-industry companies from drywall hangers to architecture firms. HACIA aims to expand the role minority contractors play in Chicago's construction scene, he said.

"We have a pretty robust legislative and government relations function ... and because (Elkhatib) has a considerable amount of relationships at the city and state level, it really helps to get access and meet with various elected officials," Perez said.

The relationships he formed while working at the mayor's office help in his current role, Elkhatib said. One-third of his work requires

his law degree, while the rest expands on the contact list he developed working with city officials and about 80 foreign diplomats that call Chicago home.

"I certainly got here because of my law degree," Elkhatib said. "But I tell people sometimes that I finished grammar school, high school, college and law school all in the city of Chicago. So I'm a lifelong Chicagoan and I love the city."

As part of HACIA's lobbying efforts, Elkhatib and Perez make trips to Springfield, where they work with lawyers from The Roosevelt Group, a lobbying firm, Perez said.

They recently advocated for a bill Perez said he hopes Gov. Patrick J. Quinn will soon sign requiring utility companies to disclose their spending with minority-owned service providers.

But not all of Elkhatib's work relates to lobbying. He handles any legal matters for HACIA, which include reviewing contracts, drafting nondisclosure agreements and, in special cases, he intervenes on behalf of HACIA's members.

Elkhatib said he represented one HACIA business, for example, and helped it save about \$900,000.

The business initially won a government contract by submitting the lowest bid for the work by about \$900,000, Elkhatib said. When a scheduling conflict arose, the business backed out of the contract, telling the governmental unit it could no longer take on the job.

"The next highest bid was \$900,000 more, so the (HACIA member company) was being pursued for that \$900,000 difference," Elkhatib said.

"That would have probably put them out of business. ... But we



Khaled J. Elkhatib

*General Counsel and Special Projects,
The Hispanic American Construction
Industry Association*

- **Headquarters:** Chicago.
- **Size:** HACIA represents about 300 companies that employ 7,000 workers.
- **Law department:** General counsel only.
- **Age:** 40.
- **Law school:** The John Marshall Law School, 1999.
- **Organizations:** Arab-American Bar Association, Network of Arab-American Professionals and Arab American Democratic Club.
- **Interests:** He enjoys biking along the lakefront, playing tennis, golfing and reading.

intervened, represented them, worked it out and convinced the government entity to drop its case."

Elkhatib said that kind of legal work, "(helping) people who can't necessarily speak up for themselves," served as an impetus to becoming a lawyer.

"When you can make that positive change and you can see the individual effect on them and their families and their companies, it's a really good feeling," he said.

Advocating on HACIA's behalf, Homero Tristan, founding partner

of Tristan & Cervantes, said his role as outside counsel to HACIA changed when it hired Elkhatib as its first general counsel last year.

"With Khaled in his role as general counsel, it just allows for a more robust conversation," Tristan said.

"He sees the issues from the ground floor being at HACIA day-in and day-out. And I think that context helps me to be able to provide better counsel because I'm not just looking at issues from the outside-in."

Tristan began working with HACIA around 2008 and said he counsels the advocacy organization on human resources issues and provides guidance on what services a business league like HACIA can provide.

After graduating from Roosevelt University, Elkhatib put his accounting degree to work for a Chicago accountant before enrolling at The John Marshall Law School, where he graduated in 1999.

His first job after law school came at the accounting firm of PricewaterhouseCoopers LLP as an associate in its tax and legal services department.

He left there to focus on representing clients as an attorney at Carpenter & Capt Chartered, an immigration firm for two years. He then worked as a general corporate attorney at Cohen & Hussien P.C. for two years.

He left the legal practice to work four years as a manager in the property bureau at the Illinois Department of Central Management Services.

Then came his role in Daley's office, which he started in 2008.

"We met people from all over the world: Presidents, kings and queens, mayors from around the world, ambassadors," he said.

His day-to-day role required working with about 80 foreign diplomats stationed in Chicago.

"Whenever they needed anything from city departments, we were their liaison," he said.

And when the president of China visited Chicago last January, Elkhatib helped the mayor's office interface with Secret Service, Chinese government officials and the U.S. State Department.

"That's probably one of the most exciting jobs I'll ever have," Elkhatib said.

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