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Top WOMEN LAWYERS 2020

Maria Stearns

Stearns' true passion for employment litigation began with a move to California from the Midwest.

"When I was practicing employment law in the Midwest, it wasn't as satisfying for me because it is very employer friendly and that was just too easy," she said. "When I came to California and I started practicing here, I was stunned by how hard it is to operate as an employer."

"I enjoy the challenge of navigating through that and helping employers figure out how to operate and be compliant," she added.

As an employment litigator, Stearns sees herself as a business partner for her clients. In addition to her experience with wage and hour class actions and Private Attorneys General Act claims, she provides clients with counseling and guidance on the employer employee relationship.

"I don't want to be the lawyer that just spits out needless amounts of legal information and then leaves it to the client to figure out what to do with that and how to operate. I want to tell them what they need to know and then give them very clear guidance on what their options are and their risk levels and help them operate in a way that reduces the litigation risk."

Most recently her time has been spent helping guide clients navigate the federal and state legislation related to COVID that have been passed and handling PAGA cases, which she says have increased in the last few months as a result of employees being furloughed and laid off.

"They go to a lawyer about the loss of their job and the lawyer starts asking them questions about meal periods, rest breaks overtime and things like that."

But these cases have a twist due to the pandemic, according to Stearns.

"What may have seemed like a reasonable resolution six months ago, is very different given COVID and the pressures on the company's finances and their sustainability."

Other matters she has handled in recent months include *Rosa Tapia v. W.K.S. Frosty Corp.*, 19STCV07892 (L.A. Super. Ct., March 7, 2019), a wage and hour class action and PAGA action. Stearns represents a large franchisee of Wendy's restaurants in the case that involves claims of unpaid overtime and missed meal periods. Stearns pushed to resolve the case as a hybrid PAGA class settlement and the case is pending awaiting review by a judge.

Stearns is also active in her community, as a board member of Project Youth OCBF, a nonprofit focused on at-risk



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youth. She's also vice president of the Orange County Chapter of the Association of Business Trial Lawyers.

— Kamila Knautd