

Chicago Firm Opens in S.F. With Laterals From Sedgwick, Long & Levit

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SAN FRANCISCO — Chicago law firm Meckler Bulger Tilson Marick & Pearson has raided several San Francisco shops to open an office here.

Meckler Bulger, a 90-lawyer firm specializing in insurance and labor and employment litigation, debuted in S.F. today with seven partners and four associates. The office will be headed by Sedgwick insurance litigator Julia Molander. She's



joined by four partners from Long & Levit: former Managing Partner Howard Garfield, Irene Yesowitch, Karen Uno and Jason Geller. Fulton Smith III comes aboard as partner from the Barber Law Group, and Daniel Crawford, the general counsel of Edgewood Partners Insurance Center, also joined as partner. The associates are Juan Araneda and David Borovsky from Long & Levit; Teri Mae Rutledge from the Barber Law Group; and T.J. Reichert from the Law Office of Semha Always.

Bruce Meckler, co-chairman of the firm, said Meckler Bulger had been gunning for San Francisco for at least five years and angling for a hook into California for the past decade. With additional offices in Dallas and Phoenix, the firm handles insurance coverage disputes and attorney fee litigation up and down California. "We always wanted to wait until we found the people we knew and liked," said Meckler, who's been in charge of recruiting. "We spent a lot of time getting to know one another over breakfast, lunches and dinners."

Meckler became acquainted with Long & Levit's Garfield and Yesowitch a few years ago when the firms went against each other in a couple of big cases. Separately, Meckler attorneys met Molander through the ABA and other professional associations, plus a few large insurance coverage cases. Meckler Bulger represents Zurich and other insurance companies, he said.

The firm is about to try a \$77.6 million whistleblower case in

Los Angeles against Caremark Rx Inc., in which Meckler represents the whistleblowers. Meckler also recently represented actor Steven Seagal in a legal fee dispute against Loeb & Loeb. With a handful of other associates slated to come aboard, Meckler expects the office to count 15 lawyers by the end of the week.

For Molander, Meckler Bulger offers her first law firm leadership role in her 30 years of practice aside from a short stint as the head of Sedgwick's women's forum. "I said I would agree to do it but the only way I'd do it is if I could be the managing partner of the office," said Molander, who has served in the past as president of the Association of Defense Counsel of Northern California and insurance committee chair of the Defense Research Institute.

Molander spent the past 13 years at Sedgwick, and before that practiced for nearly 19 with Bronson, Bronson & McKinnon, where she had been head of the insurance department.

Sedgwick's San Francisco office managing partner, Michael Healy, downplayed the impact of Molander's departure. "While we will miss working with Julia, her departure will have little to no effect on our insurance practices or our relationships with any of our clients," Healy wrote in an email. "We wish her all the best with this new endeavor."

At Long & Levit, Managing Partner Joseph McMonigle said it wasn't a surprise that the four insurance litigators decided to jump ship. The firm has focused on professional liability, insurance disputes and employment litigation for a long time, but in recent years, rate pressure from insurance companies has made it tough to reconcile the different business models in the mix.

"It's a challenge to continue to represent the insurance industry directly as a client, and it's a challenge to achieve a reasonable hourly rate," said McMonigle, whose firm now numbers 18 lawyers. He said there was more than a 100 percent difference in the firm's insurance rates and professional liability rates. He wished the group well: "We've had a very amicable parting. We think they'll succeed at their new firm and hope that they do."