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She dramatically expanded civil rights investigations in N.J. Next, she could decide cases on top court.

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Three years ago, when Rachel Wainer Apter started as a lawyer for New Jersey's attorney general, one of her first assignments was to take a look at the state's civil rights office.

She researched what other states were doing and recommended changes: New Jersey should be more aggressive, she said, by hosting more hearings, drafting legislation and digging into systemic problems.

Her boss put her in charge of the place.

"We knew that we didn't know everything that was going on on the ground," Wainer Apter told NJ Advance Media. "We were going to address that."

Gov. Phil Murphy recently nominated Wainer Apter to the state Supreme Court, and supporters have emphasized her past clerkship for the late U.S. Supreme Court Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg, her Harvard Law School education and work with the American Civil Liberties Union.

But Wainer Apter's tenure directing New Jersey's civil rights office, where she had a profound impact on residents' lives, offers perhaps the best window into her worldview.

The division is tasked with combatting problems ranging from landlords who won't rent to Black tenants to businesses that don't want to hire women.

The office can receive thousands of tips a year, according to state reports.

It's easy to get lost in that avalanche of complaints, said Chinh Le, who led the office from 2009 through 2011 and is now legal director of the Legal Aid Society of the District of Columbia. Staff cuts during the Great Recession didn't help.

Yet to be "truly effective," the division must step back to see what underlying issues allow abuse to occur in the first place, Le said.

A job combatting discrimination hit home for Wainer Apter.

Her great-grandparents fled anti-Semitic persecution in Eastern Europe and Russia, and her father had slurs screamed at him when he was a child, she said.

At the same time, those family stories could feel distant while growing up. When asked if there was ever a time she felt targeted, no example came immediately to mind.

“That is something that I did not think that I would ever see in my lifetime,” she said.

Her thinking has changed.

When Wainer Apter took office near the end of 2018, the number of reported bias crimes in the state were rising for the first time in years.

They’re still surging.

The increase is probably partially due to residents feeling more open to discussing abuse, Wainer Apter said. At the same time, “people do feel more comfortable sharing hate than they might have at some point in the past.”

In response, Wainer Apter initiated at least 150 investigations, according to a spokesman. Only 33 similar reviews were launched during the previous eight years.

Investigators also opened and completed more investigations in response to tips from the public after Wainer Apter took office, according to state data.

Numbers dipped again last year, which spokesman Leland Moore attributed to the pandemic.

While state offices have been closed, the division recently created a way for residents to file complaints online.

Investigators can approach tips multiple ways. When they believe there is enough evidence to show the state’s discrimination law was likely broken, the division can issue a “finding of probable cause.”

Those findings rose in the last two years.

Several cases were high profile.

Facebook took down a public page after Wainer Apter and other officials accused it of harboring anti-Semitism. Investigators concluded a school district did not do enough to protect a Jewish student from racist bullying, and the office went after a referee who demanded a high school wrestler cut his dreadlocks.

In the latter case, the division worked with the New Jersey State Interscholastic Athletic Association.

The association found Wainer Apter to be “both personable and responsive,” Steven Goodell, the group’s legal counsel, said in a statement. “She has performed her watchdog function well, keeping her door open to discuss our mutual concerns.”

The Monmouth County Vocational School District did not respond to questions about how they felt the bullying incident was handled by the office.

Outside civil rights attorneys and advocacy groups praised Wainer Apter’s outreach.

“A lot of people don’t even know who we are in state government” said Mary Ciccone, policy director for Disability Rights New Jersey. Wainer Apter nonetheless sought and included the nonprofit’s input in a report about bias in the classroom, Ciccone said.

That report was born out of a close look at state data.

While New Jersey has long tracked bias crimes, nobody had really analyzed the numbers, officials said.

The office has since held public hearings and issued multiple reports that highlighted, among other issues, the prevalence of prejudice in schools.

Wainer Apter made sweeping recommendations that all public school kids and teachers receive anti-bias education. The “failure of bystanders to intervene, of school administrators to address it, and of parents and broader communities to condemn it, can teach children as much about what their community is prepared to tolerate as the act of hate itself,” the report said.

In response to the #MeToo movement, Wainer Apter helped run hearings on sexual harassment.

People could testify anonymously or have another speak on their behalf, which helped get feedback from undocumented residents who might otherwise not have shared, said Penny Venetis, a Rutgers University law professor and director of the International Human Rights Clinic.

The resulting report led to new legislation, and one bill (A4637) requiring harassment training in workplaces is now before a committee.

“I’ve been practicing employment law for 25 years, and I don’t think I’ve ever seen someone take the helm like she did,” said Kirsten Branigan, an attorney with KSBranigan Law in Montclair who testified at the hearings.

Wainer Apter’s office has repeatedly weighed in on lawsuits and issued new policy information — all actions that weren’t taken earlier in the decade, the spokesman said.

Part of the office’s expansion was in response to President Donald Trump’s policies.

State Attorney General Gurbir Grewal has said he chose staff partially based on who could best challenge federal policies.

Before Wainer Apter took over the civil rights office, she was part of a surge of federal lawsuits unprecedented in recent state history. Grewal has repeatedly said one of his proudest moments was watching Wainer Apter defend the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals program in court, which protects some undocumented residents from deportation. She won.

Later, Grewal said he wanted Wainer Apter to run the civil rights division because the Trump administration was failing to protect “people of color, LGBTQ people, women, immigrants, people with disabilities, and other marginalized communities.”

Office staff numbered 66 by the end of last year, up from 62 the year before she took over, according to a spokesman. Four more people tasked with community outreach joined March 15, the same day Wainer Apter’s nomination was announced, Wainer Apter said.

“The division on civil rights still has so much unmet potential, and still has so much to grow,” she said. “It needs new resources in order to fully be able to meet the need.”

If Wainer Apter is confirmed by the state Senate, she could influence New Jersey’s top court for decades.