

Regulatory Oversight* Podcast — Leadership and Innovation at the Illinois AG's Office*Hosts: Stephen Piepgrass, Stephanie Kozol, and Chuck Slempp****Guests: Kwame Raoul and Brent Stratton****Aired: April 24, 2025****Stephen Piepgrass:**

Welcome to another episode of *Regulatory Oversight*, a podcast dedicated to delivering expert analysis on the latest developments shaping the regulatory landscape. I'm one of your hosts, Stephen Piepgrass, and the leader of our firm's Regulatory Investigation, Strategy and Enforcement Practice Group. This podcast highlights insights from members of our RISE Practice Group, including its nationally ranked state attorney's general practice, as well as guest commentary from industry leaders, regulatory specialists, and government officials. Our team is committed to bringing you valuable perspectives, in-depth analysis, and practical advice from some of the foremost authorities in the field today. Before we begin, I encourage all our listeners to visit and subscribe to our blog at [RegulatoryOversight.com](https://www.regulatoryoversight.com) to stay current on the latest in regulatory news.

Today, my colleagues, Chuck Slempp and Stephanie Kozol are joined by Illinois Attorney General, Kwame Raoul, and Chief Deputy Attorney General Brent Stratton. Attorney General Raoul has served as Illinois 42nd Attorney General since 2019. As AG, he has focused on combating violent crime, safeguarding consumers from fraud, and holding industries accountable for public health threats, while also working to enhance government transparency. General Raoul started his career as a prosecutor in the Cook County State Attorney's office, and went on to be a partner at two national corporate law firms. In 2004, he was appointed to fill a State Senate vacancy in the 13th Legislative District, where he was subsequently reelected multiple times to serve for 14 years before running for Attorney General.

Brent Stratton joined the Illinois Attorney General's office in 2005 and has served as the Chief Deputy Attorney General since 2011, overseeing more than 400 attorneys and providing counsel to the Attorney General and Chief of Staff. Previously, Brent served as Assistant Chief Deputy and Deputy Chief on the Public Interest Division. Before joining the AG's office, Stratton was in private practice for more than 20 years, including as a partner for three different firms. He's also been a faculty member of trial practice programs for the Chicago Bar Association and the National Association of Attorneys General.

Chuck and Stephanie are both members of our RISE Practice Group and nationally ranked state attorney's general team. Among other topics, Chuck and Stephanie and General Raoul and Brent plan to discuss are their respective journeys into public service, the collaborative efforts between federal and local law enforcement to reduce criminal activity in Illinois, and the office's initiatives in cybersecurity. Our guests also plan to pull back the curtain a bit on the AG's office and discuss the strategies implemented to ensure effective collaboration among the various divisions within the office.

General Raoul, Brent, Chuck, and Stephanie, I want to thank you all for joining me today. I know we are all looking forward to your discussion.

Stephanie Kozol:

Thank you, Stephen, for that introduction. My name is Stephanie Kozol, Senior Government Relations Manager in the State Attorneys General practice at Troutman Pepper Locke. I'm joined today by my colleague Chuck Slempp, counsel at the firm. We have the honor of speaking with Illinois Attorney General Kwame Raoul.

Chuck Slempp:

Thanks Stephanie, and we're also joined by Chief Deputy Attorney General Brent Stratton. General and Mr. Stratton, welcome both of you to the show.

Brent Stratton:

Thanks for having us.

Kwame Raoul:

Yes, thank you.

Stephanie Kozol:

Before we dive into big issues and your work at the Illinois AG Office, General, I'd love to have you tell our listeners a little bit about you and your background and how you've got into politics.

Kwame Raoul:

Well, I'm a lifelong resident of the state of Illinois and lifelong Chicagoan. Grew up, spent my entire life, never went away for college. Went to undergrad at DePaul University, go Blue Demons, and law school at Chicago Kent. Began my career as a prosecutor in the Cook County State's Attorney's office, worked as in-house at our community college system in Chicago, and worked at two national firms. Served 14 years in the General Assembly in the State Senate, having replaced Barack Obama when he vacated his State Senate seat to go to the US Senate in 2004. And in 2018, I was elected to replace Lisa Madigan, my predecessor who had served four terms, as Attorney General. She often joked that I had been waiting for her to step away, which I looked at the office for a long, long time as some place that I would aspire to work and to lead. And so, it's sort of a dream for me to be able to serve in this capacity.

Chuck Slempp:

Well, you certainly are making that huge difference there in the office. What inspired you to get into politics to begin with?

Kwame Raoul:

When I was in college, Harold Washington was elected the first African-American mayor of the city of Chicago, and so I was excited getting into the campaign at a very low level. And shortly after I'd graduated from college, he suddenly passed away and I observed the disarray that ensued after the several years of hope. And I thought to myself, one day if I go to law school that I might lend myself to politics.

And so indeed, maybe about a year after graduating from law school, I lent myself to a campaign for city council, which I lost and I'm very happy I lost. But I actually ended up running for City Council twice unsuccessfully and running for State Senate and with the idea that I watched the disarray after Mayor Washington's death and I thought certain communities weren't best represented and that we could be represented with more competent talent. And without really having any political connections, haven't been part of any organization or anything like that, or having a relative, sort of the Chicago way that was involved in politics. I just ran, didn't know what I was doing, campaign-wise. And so, I'm a three-time loser, but learned lessons every time.

Stephanie Kozol:

That's fantastic. And as we sit here with both of you today, I know you have a fabulous team surrounding you, and one of them is with us today. And I know Chuck would like to ask Brent a little bit about your background as well and bring you into the conversation.

Chuck Slempp:

Absolutely. I served as Chief Deputy AG of Virginia and one of the best experience in that office was the chance to get to work with others who held the same role at different states. And I met Brent through our work with NAAG, the National Association of Attorneys General. I think we spoke on some panel or something together, Brent. And so for folks who don't know you, would love to get to know you and the work that you do and why it matters.

Brent Stratton:

Well, absolutely. My path to the office was a little unusual. I graduated from Northwestern Law School, taught legal writing for a year, and then I worked for a small criminal defense firm in Chicago for almost 10 years. Great, exciting type of practice. And then the firm dissolved and I went to a big law firm, and then the second big law firm.

And then during the first year of Lisa Madigan's tenure as AG, a friend of mine said, "Hey, you should come interview at the office. You've got just the kind of experience we need. You have criminal, you have civil, etc." So I decided to interview for the job that I have now, and thankfully they didn't hire me for this job because I, looking back, I was not prepared for it. But they hired me for a different position and I was in the office for about five years doing things throughout the office. And then the chief deputy retired and they promoted me to the position. So I served as AG Madigan's Chief Deputy for her last two terms, eight years. And then when AG Raoul was

elected, he decided to keep me on, which I was very grateful for, and it's been a great run ever since.

Chuck Slemp:

Well, you're something like the dean, so to speak, of chief deputies around the country. Everybody looks to you for advice. I know I did.

Kwame Raoul:

One of the things that Brent left out about my deciding to keep him on, he was helping during the transition and he was bringing in people who led different parts of the office and I was learning about the office. And we went through about a week of meetings, different leaders in the office and came upon the end of a week and I thought to myself, I said, "Brent, there's one thing that I've forgotten to ask you. Will you please stay on his Chief Deputy?" And it was almost fumble on my part to not have asked for him to stay on, and he's been invaluable ever since with the institutional knowledge of the office and helping me transition to making it a little bit of my office with tweaks here, tweaks there. But without somebody with the knowledge of the office that Brent has and the temperament and that's likable by all in the office, my tenure wouldn't have the success that it's had.

Stephanie Kozol:

That's really great to hear, and I think Chuck and I would both say the same thing about Brent, well liked by all. And we spend some time on the road going to events together and it's always nice to be together and interact and to be with your friends and people that you know and respect. And so, so many of us and so many of our listeners, Brent, know what you do, but would you mind going in just a little bit and telling some of our listeners who might not know what your job responsibilities are day to day? How do you keep the wheels turning in that office? What are you kind of doing each day?

Brent Stratton:

Sure. For folks that are familiar with private practice, my job is very similar to what the managing partner would be at a large law firm. We are, I think the largest law firm in the state of Illinois. We have over 500 lawyers in our office, two main offices, Chicago and Springfield, and then a number of smaller offices. And we have probably 35 different, we call them bureaus, that are subject matter bureaus within the office that range everything on the criminal side and pretty much everything on the civil side, except some real specialties like intellectual property law, patent law, we don't do a lot of admiralty law here, but just about everything else. We have a huge part of the civil side that's defense, so we defend the state and every one of its employees and officers whenever they get sued. And then we have a very large affirmative side of the office that does any range of things, civil rights, disability rights, antitrust, environmental protection, public utilities, on and on and on.

And so, I have a great staff of senior supervisors under me on the criminal side. On the civil side, we have a large appellate group that handles all appeals that involve the State of Illinois,

every criminal case in the Illinois Supreme Court we handle. So I have a great group of that level of supervisors who report it to me, and then they've got a lot of folks under them that report it to them. So yeah, I do try to keep the trains running, that's a huge part of my job. And then I get involved in cases here and there when they're of particular importance to the Attorney General or newsworthy or problematic, and so I will dip into some of those. But otherwise, just try to keep everyone else, have their jobs be as easy as possible so that I can take care of the stuff that's not as maybe sexy, but is important to keep big office running.

Chuck Slemp:

Well, a lot of folks don't understand the behind the scenes work at AG's offices, but General, I know that you've put together an incredible team, and Brent is an example of that. Can you talk through for us a little bit your approach to the office, and maybe in particular some of your key priorities, the things that you're working on and you are most proud of for your team and the work that they're doing?

Kwame Raoul:

First off, I can't take credit for some of what was established before I got here, so I inherited a lot of good staff. There was some amount of turnover, maybe just about the perfect amount that allowed for me to both promote from within, as well as bring new talent into the office.

One of the things that I sought out to address right away. I knew that in 2018, the year before I took helm of the office, I did a survey and our office had the worst retention rate in the country. And so I had just come from the legislature, and I made the case for the Attorney General office and I was sort of unapologetic about saying that the state needed to invest in this office. That the office had been good towards the state over the six years of my tenure, for every dollar that we got from the State General Revenue Fund, we returned \$22.50, and so I challenged them to find an investment somewhere else that had that type of return.

There were several areas of the office that I wanted to enhance. One was our worker protection unit. As a legislator, I had passed legislation that would do just that, sort of enhance the worker protection work. That did pre-exist me coming in, but we enhanced it a bit and we've had some huge successes in making certain that rogue employers were not taking advantage of employees throughout our state, and we've made our mark on that front.

One of the things that I prioritize highly is protecting kids, and so we invested well in our Internet Crimes Against Children Task Force, as well as we've invested in making certain we address things like vaping, harms of electronic cigarettes to children, as well as social media as one of the new that we're well invested in in protecting young people from the many harms that are on social media.

There are a couple of things that we've done on a criminal side that I think is a little bit different that is just enhanced upon what pre-existed. I think we've improved our partnerships with federal law enforcement partners, probably both federal and local law enforcement partners. We made a concerted effort to do that and that has helped us with gun trafficking, organized retail crime, and other criminal activity. We've really made a couple of strategic hires. My chief of Staff I hired from the US Attorney's Office. Originally I hired her to be Deputy AG of Criminal, and we

hired an investigator who was a retiree from the FBI. Those two strategic hires kind of allowed us to have great relationships with federal law enforcement partners and produce great results.

Chuck Slemp:

You talked a little bit about the work on the organized retail crime front, and I know that's one of the things that Brent, that we got to work together some on over the course of the past few years that shared multi-state work across political spectrum, across big states, small state, working together to try to make a difference on an issue. And I know another issue that you've been working on is you're working the cyber security task force. We'd love to hear about that a little bit.

Brent Stratton:

The one thing that I think has been unique about the organized retail crime effort that AG Raoul has done, is that he very deliberately brought in all of the retail part of the equation, so the big box stores and the platforms that sell online. And so it was a unique combination, because usually AG offices are more going after corporations for alleged wrongdoing, and here we were very deliberately partnering with them for a common cause of trying to attack the retail crime.

Kwame Raoul:

Yeah, that's a good point. We created a ORC task force and we met with law enforcement all throughout the state, local law enforcement leaders, state's attorneys, as well as police chiefs and sheriffs who weren't prioritizing organized retail crime because in the mix of things, they thought we were just talking about ordinary retail theft and didn't understand the multilevel nature of organized retail crime. And so, we took some representatives of both big box stores as well as pharmacy stores around state with us to meet with law enforcement to get them to appreciate the nature and the magnitude of this criminal activity.

The other thing we did is, as Brent mentioned, we brought together the platforms, and I remember saying to them, "I'm inviting you into my restaurant. You could come into the kitchen to help us cook up a solution to this problem. If not, we're going to put you on the menu." We're not taking responsibility for doing something to solve this problem because these online platforms have been used as a tool to monetize the proceeds from organized retail crime. No longer is it selling at a flea market or in the back alley or in a parking lot somewhere selling on, I won't mention platforms, but selling on online platforms makes it easier to monetize and to use those proceeds for other criminal activities such as gun trafficking, human trafficking, terrorism, even.

You mentioned our cybersecurity. We're good at making lemonade out of lemons. While we were dealing with the challenges of the coronavirus pandemic that led all people working to be heavily reliant on technology to communicate with one another because you had many people working remotely. At a time when we were so reliant on our technology, we were hit with a ransomware attack, and it's quite devastating to us at the moment. We didn't really know what to do at the moment, and we leaned on our law enforcement partners at the FBI, they were terrific. And as a result of our experience, we learned how to buttress invest in our infrastructure and to train our staff to maximize our protection against such an event happening again. And

then we lent ourselves to other offices to let them know how they can avoid having the experience that we had, and I think it was 2021. So, we've become somewhat experts as a result of our bad experience.

Stephanie Kozol:

Well, you sure have been a strong advocate for consumers, you, your office, your team, and I know we just talked about some of the highlights. I'd love to ask each of you, stepping away from some hard-hitting journalism. I'd love to just ask both of you, one, what each of you is most proud of what you've accomplished while you've been in this role, in the role that you're in and what your favorite thing is about being in that role. And maybe it's the same thing, but I'd love to hear a little bit from each of you.

Kwame Raoul:

Sure. I'll start. I suppose what I'm most proud of is not a subject matter sort of focused accomplishment, certainly, we've had those. But as I said, I inherited a good team. I'm proud of investing in that team and being able to lift up people who were already here to leadership roles, as well as find people externally to bring them in and to create the office as more of a place that people would want to come to and stay for some time. I think we've dramatically improved the morale in the office. We've done so in part by increasing compensation, but it's not just increasing compensation.

I think we've sort of curated events within the office to break down the silos and have our teams interact with one another. Breaking down the silos is I think, an important and very intentional focus of mine since I've been in the office, not only from a standpoint of having one bureau know what another bureau is doing, but sometimes they touch each other. And so, I always talk about bringing in our civil rights team and our criminal prosecutions team into the same conference room and sitting them across from one another and asking for their input on legislation that the office is going to weigh in on. And those are two different personalities of the office and it's fun for me to be at the end of the table getting that input while they contradict and compete with one another, but it's a healthy exchange that helps my ultimate decision making on positions that I take. But I think if you polled the lawyers and the rest of the staff in the office, you'd find out that there's a strong morale in our office, and that's something that I'm most proud of.

Brent Stratton:

I'll answer the second question first. And the thing I think I've enjoyed the most about being in this position is the incredible variety of issues and areas of the law. Hardly a week goes by that I don't get presented with some question or issue that I have never heard before, and I am now having to figure out the answer to it. And sometimes I have to do that by myself, but that's pretty rare. Almost all the time I'm going to the subject matter experts in the office and saying, "Here's this new issue that I'm dealing with. What's the answer? Or how do we figure out how to solve this?" And that's been really fun.

The thing I'm most proud of, I suppose, is that I'm not sure I thought I had any skill in fixing organizational structural problems, but I've had to kind of dig into a couple of those over the

years. 10 years ago, we had a part of the office that just wasn't working very well, and then chief of staff said, "We've got to fix this," and we disassembled that part of the office down to the studs, I suppose, and figured out where all the problems were and rebuilt it in a way that is working pretty well.

And then to my dismay, a similar part of the office was having a real struggle a few years ago, a couple of years ago. And so we decided to try something entirely different about the way we recruited and trained and retained people. And cross my fingers, it's been working pretty well. So it was just very gratifying to get the buy-in from all the folks that needed to buy in to trying something completely new and to see it work.

Chuck Slemp:

I love that. And leadership is at its core about service and taking action and making things better, creating environments where, as you said, General, taking lemons and making lemonade. And you two both make an incredible team, and you've been so good at working together to serve the people of your great state.

Now it's time for the serious question that all of us I think are dying to ask, and that is, lifelong Chicagoan. General, Cubs or White Sox?

Kwame Raoul:

Oh, White Sox. Although it's the most difficult time in probably history to be a White Sox fan, I think you'll have to go back to Shoeless Joe to find a more embarrassing time, but I'm loyal.

Chuck Slemp:

I'm so sorry for the team's struggles. Hopefully they'll have a better season ahead.

Kwame Raoul:

Couldn't be worse.

Chuck Slemp:

What about you, Brett?

Brent Stratton:

I am not a lifelong Chicagoan. I moved here in 1981, which shapes how I answer this question. In 1981, the Cubs were terrible, the White Sox were terrible. They had both been terrible for decades, so I decided I'm just going to root for both of them, since I don't have that inbred Chicago reason to root for one or the other. So I got to root for the White Sox in 1983 when they made the playoffs for the first time since 1959, and I got to root for the Cubs at '84 when they made the playoffs for the first time since 1945. And I've just kind of kept it going and tried to benefit from the successes of any of them. It's still pretty rare, but it's been fun to watch the

White Sox win their first World Series in a long, long time, and then the Cubs in even longer. So, not a popular position to be in in Chicago to not take sides, but that's because of where I -

Kwame Raoul:

Yeah, you got to choose.

Chuck Slemp:

I think that's the role of the Chief Deputy. I think it's perfect. You got to make everybody happy. I love it. No house divided.

Brent Stratton:

I feel very strongly both ways, so.

Stephanie Kozol:

That's great, guys. That's awesome. I love ending on a question like that. It's always a little fun to dig a little bit into something personal and something kind of light and fun. So, thanks for spending time with us this morning. We're so grateful for both of you for taking time out of your busy day and serving the great State of Illinois, and we're just thrilled for you to have been here with us today. So, thank you.

Kwame Raoul:

Thank you. And Stephanie, if I could on a final note just say, what a wonderful... I've spoken to my predecessor, Lisa Madigan, and she shared with me that she didn't engage as much in some of the meetings of Attorneys General as much as I have, and I think that's one of the gratifying things that I missed earlier, in response to your earlier question. Working with other state AGs sometimes on a partisan basis, but also on a bipartisan basis, and I've really gotten to know them, I've gotten to know their families. And it makes a difference when you're collaborating to make change. Obviously, right now is a time when we're intensely collaborating, but working together has made easier by knowing each other.

Chuck Slemp:

Well, and it's been a pleasure to get to know both of you throughout the years and to continue to work with you as you serve the people of your great state. Thank you again for being with us today.

Stephen Piepgrass:

General Raoul, Brent, Chuck, and Stephanie, I want to thank you again for joining me today. This has been an interesting conversation, and I'm sure our listeners also enjoyed your insights. And thank you to our audience for tuning in. Remember to subscribe to this podcast on whatever platform you choose, and we look forward to having you join us again next time.

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