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## Equal Rights Advocates Adds DOJ Atty As Litigation Head

By James Mills

Law360 (July 31, 2024, 1:09 PM EDT) -- Equal Rights Advocates, a gender justice/women's rights nonprofit, announced Tuesday it is bringing in a U.S. Department of Justice civil rights attorney as head of its litigation team.

Catherine Bendor joins Equal Rights Advocates as its director of litigation after 18 years with the Department of Justice in two different stints. She has a long history working on civil rights issues, especially those centering on gender, racial and economic justice.

In a Wednesday afternoon interview, Bendor told Law360 Pulse she is excited about the new opportunities that the job offers.



Catherine Bendor

"I've done civil rights advocacy in a number of different issue areas," Bendor said. "One thing I'm particularly excited about ERA's work is that they focus on employment and education, which are two of the most important building blocks for developing opportunities for people, making sure people have fair opportunities to get an education, obtain and maintain jobs, and succeed. I'm very excited to work on those issues."

She is especially looking forward to meeting new attorneys and working with new coalitions in this job.

"I'm also excited about the idea of working on employment and education issues that benefit not only women, but generations of the future, their children," she said.

Although Equal Rights Advocates is based in San Francisco, Bendor will be working in Washington, D.C.

"ERA is expanding its focus to do more work on a national scale, so I am helping with that effort," Bendor said. "They've hired several people in D.C. in the last year. I'm overseeing the group's litigation and efforts to develop new cases around the country."

Equal Rights Advocates, which was founded in 1974, is hoping Bendor's expertise will "invigorate and amplify" its legal team's work for gender justice and human rights nationwide.

"Catherine is an accomplished leader with extensive legal expertise and the ability to build power among partners," Noreen Farrell, executive director of Equal Rights Advocates and chair of Equal Pay Today, said in a statement. "Her track record in civil rights litigation and advocacy speaks volumes about her dedication and impact. We are ecstatic to bring her aboard at a time when our fight for gender justice is more crucial than ever. Catherine's vision will strengthen our efforts and energize our legal team to achieve even greater strides in advancing gender justice."

Bendor grew up in the New York area and became interested in social justice at an early age thanks to her Jewish parents, who lost most of their families during World War II.

"I'm a first-generation American. My family experienced a tremendous amount of terrible determination and worse in Eastern Europe," she said. "So, I've always been about fighting to make

things fair and trying to make sure everybody has opportunities to be their best selves."

Even before she entered law school, she knew she wanted to be a litigator.

"I've always been interested in public interest law," she said. "My early decision was not what kind of lawyer I was going to be, but how I was going to work to advance social justice. So, I went to law school and have held a public interest law career throughout."

Bendor earned her law degree in 1992 at Harvard Law School after earning her bachelor's degree in modern European studies from Cornell University.

In 1998, she joined the Department of Justice as a senior trial attorney working in the civil rights division, housing and civil enforcement section. There she was especially focused on litigation challenging discrimination in housing, zoning and other land use practices, according to her LinkedIn profile.

She moved to the National Law Center on Homelessness & Poverty in 2006, serving as its legal director. Then in 2010, she moved to the Spiva Law Firm PLLC as senior counsel, handling litigation in the federal courts.

In 2014, she returned to the Department of Justice, serving as senior trial attorney with the special litigation section. She focused largely on civil rights matters in correctional settings, especially for female prisoners.

Later, she moved up to be deputy chief of the housing and civil enforcement section, enforcing matters related to the Fair Housing Act and other civil rights statutes. Eventually, she became special litigation counsel of the section.

While at the DOJ in the late 1990s, she litigated and tried the first pattern or practice case alleging sexual harassment in housing and had a successful result.

Similarly, she was the lead attorney on a complex disability rights case in Baltimore that resulted in beneficial changes for low-income people with disabilities in that city.

She also reported handling a number of cases involving familial status discrimination against individuals and their children in housing situations.

"I became involved in litigation because I like to bring about concrete results and I like to make sure the law is respected and enforced," Bendor said. "It's a way to redress violations of rights in the past and also try to create better circumstances for the future."

--Editing by Robert Rudinger.