

Veteran Environmental Lawyer Leads DOJ Transition Review Team



Introduction to the DOJ Review Team

Jonathan Brightbill, a seasoned environmental attorney and former senior official in the Trump administration's Justice Department (DOJ), has been tapped to lead the DOJ review team for the president-elect's transition efforts. The team has begun conducting briefings to prepare for the incoming administration, according to three sources familiar with the process.

Brightbill, who previously served as a principal deputy in the DOJ's Environment and Natural Resources Division, is steering the review effort alongside a group of former Trump-era DOJ officials. The team's mission is to gather critical information and draft strategic memos to facilitate a seamless transition for the department's new political leadership, expected to assume office on January 20.

Key Members of the Transition Team

The review team includes several high-profile legal professionals:

Sarah Harris, a partner at Williams & Connolly and former deputy assistant attorney general in the Office of Legal Counsel during Trump's first term. Harris is a seasoned appellate lawyer with five Supreme Court arguments under her belt and a history of clerking for Justice Clarence Thomas. Her sister currently serves as a politically appointed deputy in the Biden administration's Criminal Division.

John Daukas, a former acting head of the DOJ's Civil Rights Division and a longtime partner at Goodwin Procter before joining the prior Trump administration. Daukas has also served as the Senate Judiciary Committee's chief civil counsel for Senator Lindsey Graham (R-S.C.).

A Blend of Expertise and Loyalty

The composition of the team underscores a reliance on experienced conservative lawyers and former DOJ officials. These volunteers represent an initial step in shaping the DOJ's future direction under the new administration. However, their inclusion in the transition process does not guarantee permanent roles in the department, as these positions are subject to future appointments.

Strategic Goals of the Transition

The agency review teams aim to ensure continuity and strategic planning across executive departments. For the DOJ, this involves:

Drafting Policy Recommendations: Preparing memos and action plans to align the department's initiatives with the president-elect's agenda.

Facilitating Leadership Transition: Engaging with career employees to understand ongoing programs and identify areas requiring immediate attention.

Assessing Organizational Structure: Evaluating how the department can better align its resources and efforts with the administration's goals.

Firm Responses and Professional Affiliations

Brightbill, who leads Winston & Strawn's environmental litigation and enforcement practice, has confirmed his volunteer role in the transition effort. A spokesperson for the firm emphasized its nonpartisan stance, reaffirming that Brightbill remains exclusively employed by Winston & Strawn. Harris and Williams & Connolly have declined to comment on her involvement, while Daukas has not issued a public statement.

Broader Context of the Transition

Agency review teams have historically played a pivotal role in bridging administrations. Members often provide institutional knowledge and insights that shape early-stage policymaking. While some team members may transition into permanent government roles, others contribute solely during the review phase.

In this instance, the DOJ review team's composition reflects a strategic blend of legal expertise and ideological alignment with the president-elect's objectives. The team's efforts are expected to influence the department's priorities in areas ranging from environmental enforcement to civil rights protections.

Conclusion

As the president-elect prepares to assume office, the DOJ review team's work is a critical step in laying the groundwork for the administration's vision for the Justice Department. With experienced legal professionals at the helm, the transition process aims to balance continuity with the strategic overhaul promised by the incoming leadership.