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Phone: +1 646 783 7100 | Fax: +1 646 783 7161 | [customerservice@law360.com](mailto:customerservice@law360.com)

## Husch Blackwell Debuts Psychedelics Practice Team

By **Sam Reisman**

Law360 (March 16, 2022, 8:21 PM EDT) -- Husch Blackwell LLP has launched a legal practice group dedicated to helping clients navigate the emerging space of researching and developing medicines derived from federally controlled psychedelics.

The Kansas City-headquartered firm on Tuesday announced the debut of its psychedelics and emerging therapies group, which will be under the leadership of product liability litigators Kimberly Chew, Karen Luong and Natasha Sumner.

The California-based trio of senior counsel attorneys all came on board **last April** as part of a West Coast-based team of 21 litigators who joined Husch Blackwell from Dentons and opened offices in the Bay Area and Los Angeles.

The group's debut marks one of the first instances of a national U.S. law firm creating a devoted practice to advise scientists, clinicians and product designers exploring the potential health benefits of Schedule I substances such as MDMA, psilocybin, LSD, ketamine and DMT.

The practice group leads told Law360 during a phone interview Wednesday that they felt a personal connection to the work, pointing to their experience with family members who suffered from treatment-resistant post-traumatic stress disorder — a condition for which clinical trials of psychedelic use coupled with therapy have shown efficacy.

"All three of us come with a personal connection such that we understand the impetus behind a lot of this and the promise of this work," Luong said.

In some ways, the psychedelics decriminalization trend resembles where cannabis was roughly a decade ago, with **law firms cautiously beginning to explore** what counsel they can provide for early players in a fledgling, and still unlawful, space.

But the comparisons only go so far, the group leaders say. After cannabis reformers notched early wins decriminalizing the plant for medical use in some states, the industry shifted gears quickly as more states legalized marijuana for adult recreational use.

"Here, we have so much clinical research into psychedelics' use — mostly in mental health, but also chronic pain and strokes," Sumner said. "Of course we don't know where this will go. I don't know if this will go into the recreational arena."

Although some municipalities and states have made efforts at decriminalizing or regulating psychedelics, the emergence of a whole set of state-regulated retail markets for psychedelic drugs seems a long way off, the attorneys said.

"It will be interesting to see if the decriminalization movement gets moving in the U.S.," said Chew.



Natasha Sumner



Kimberly Chew



Karen Luong

"It won't be an easy lift for any one state."

They say the work is more focused on issues under federal jurisdiction, such as helping researchers remain compliant with Drug Enforcement Administration regulations that tightly control how Schedule I substances can be handled by scientists.

It's an arena where the group leads say they can bring to bear their experience as product liability defenders, as well as Chew's background as a life sciences researcher prior to taking up law.

"It's useful to have someone with that perspective," Luong said. "No one wants to hire a product liability defense litigator ever. But people in our space can offer services on the back end, and what we really want to do is help companies effectively avoid those potential pitfalls."

They anticipate growing intellectual property opportunities as well. As larger clinical trials on different substances are developed and their findings are published, they anticipate the DEA will reschedule at least some psychedelics currently designated as Schedule I — meaning there is no acknowledged medical benefit — and then the dam will break on developers attempting to patent their formulations.

"There's been a sea change in the way the government is looking at it," Luong said. "When we are talking about these Schedule I substances, the reason there's so much optimism and anticipation is because ... [there are] phase 3 clinical trials that show an actual astonishing medical benefit."

Currently there are approximately nine Husch Blackwell lawyers focused on psychedelics and new treatments, spread out across Denver, New York, Chicago and elsewhere. The goal, the team leaders said, was to create an umbrella group that can bring together various specialty practices, including health care compliance and corporate formation.

"I've been following this whole arena of psychedelic research, particularly the studies for the last few years around PTSD," Sumner said. "And when we moved over to Husch Blackwell, the timing was honestly quite perfect in terms of where this novel and emerging area is."

"The three of us have such an interest in it," Sumner added. "We knew it was an area we wanted to explore."

--Additional reporting by Justin Wise. Editing by Stephen Berg.

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