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Profile in Public Integrity: Karl Racine

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Profile in Public Integrity:

Karl Racine

Attorney General, District of Columbia



Attorney General Karl A. Racine is the first elected Attorney General of the District of Columbia. With his inauguration at the beginning of 2015, the [Office of the Attorney General](#) (OAG) began an era of independence for the agency and accountability to District residents. As the chief legal officer for the District of Columbia, Attorney General Racine relies on his prior legal and leadership experience as a public defender and the first African-American managing partner of a top-100 US law firm, Venable LLP, to advise the Mayor and District agencies, defend the city in court and use the law to advance the public interest.

What motivated you to run for Attorney General in the first-ever election for this position?

I care about my hometown. I have lived in the District of Columbia since I was a young child. When it became clear that the District would be holding its first-ever election for Attorney General, I decided to throw my hat in the ring because I knew I had the requisite experience and skills to perform the duties that would be required – including doing everything I could to ensure that the first person in this office created a truly independent Office of the Attorney General. There were also some specific areas of need where I believed that an elected Attorney General could really make a difference in improving the lives of District residents, including: strengthening public safety through evidence-based reforms to our juvenile justice system that reduce recidivism and get people on the right track; using all the tools available to us to protect consumers from unscrupulous business practices; using the law to preserve affordable housing and hold slumlords accountable; working to promote public integrity, including advocating for campaign finance reform; and advocating for autonomy and self-determination for the 700,000 residents of our nation’s capital, who are denied voting representation in Congress.

As the first elected Attorney General for the District of Columbia, how is your relationship with the city government different from that of previous AGs who were appointed by the mayor?

Our independence gives us both the right and the responsibility not to reflexively defend the decisions of our government agencies, but rather to independently assess the merits of any decision and decide whether the facts and law support the government’s position. We also can propose and advocate for legislation to solve problems that we have identified through our work. For example, we have proposed – and the Council and Mayor approved – legislation to fight the spread of synthetic drugs in the District by making it easier for law enforcement to test for, and identify, dangerous compounds that many members of the public thought were simply synthetic marijuana, but in fact were untested chemicals. We also secured an amendment to our consumer laws that makes it easier for our office to hold slumlords accountable for restitution to current and former tenants who lived in their properties under non-habitable conditions. In addition, we have proposed and argued in favor of comprehensive campaign finance reform, pay-to-play restrictions, and public financing. I note that these positions conflict with the views of other elected officials in the District.

What is the role of the Attorney General's office in advancing public integrity in D.C., and how does that mesh with the office's other priorities in terms of prosecution, consumer protection, and its role as the City's representative?

Our office promotes public integrity in many ways. The first and foremost is as a bully pulpit to advocate for reforms such as our campaign-finance-reform legislation (as mentioned above). We also protect the public fisc by bringing or joining suits against those who try to cheat our taxpayers; for instance, we won nearly \$19.4 million in a settlement of a false-claims suit with a former food-service contractor for the District's public schools. And, of course, we are working to advance public integrity on the federal level by bringing suit, along with Maryland Attorney General Brian Frosh, to get President Trump to stop violating the Constitution's Foreign and Domestic Emoluments Clauses. These provisions are the United States' original anti-corruption laws, because they were designed to ensure the President's decisions were motivated by the national interest rather than his own private financial interests.

How would you describe your office's primary successes in the field of anti-corruption, and how will you build upon them if elected to a second term?

Our primary successes have been in bringing lawsuits to hold accountable those who would cheat our taxpayers or defraud our government, as well as those who cheat our consumers. We've returned tens of millions of dollars to District taxpayers through judgments and settlements, for instance, with financial institutions like Deutsche Bank, Moody's, and Barclay's for manipulating and misrepresenting financial information in the run-up to the 2008 financial crisis. We also fight Medicaid fraud. Since I took office in 2015, we have recovered millions of dollars for the District's taxpayers through settlement or judgments with pharmaceutical companies that try to cheat or overcharge the District's Medicaid program.

One of your primary initiatives for government accountability is improved campaign finance transparency. What are your thoughts on the prospects of the bill you sponsored, and what steps do you believe need to be made to improve campaign finance in D.C.?

We think the prospects are quite good for our bill's main provisions – preventing pay-to-play politics and increasing transparency. The Chairman of our D.C. Council Judiciary Committee has assured us that he will move a bill this year that incorporates the best of our legislation as well as other provisions. In addition, I strongly supported a separate measure to create a public financing system for campaigns in the District of Columbia. I'm proud to say that legislation has passed our Council, and the Mayor just signed it into law.

How can CAPI better assist public integrity officials like you in your important work?

I think by doing exactly what you're doing now: Bringing attention to the intense need for public officials to advocate for integrity at the national, state, and local levels as well as within their own offices.