

# BRIEF HISTORY OF THE NEW YORK CITY LAW DEPARTMENT OFFICE OF THE CORPORATION COUNSEL



The New York City Law Department is one of the oldest and most dynamic legal offices in the world, ranking among New York City's largest law offices and the country's largest public law offices. From its modest origins, the Law Department – also called the Office of the Corporation Counsel – grew to meet the City's ever-evolving needs.

The Law Department began from an English institution known as the Recorder, an office established in New York City by Governor Thomas Dongan in 1683. The Recorder was a combination of political and legal counselor to the recently incorporated City – also called “the corporation.” By the early 19th century, the Recorder's legal business was more than one person could manage, and the City Council named a new attorney to handle the work.

The attorney, along with a few colleagues, oversaw the City's legal dealings. The counsels to the corporation came and went, and the City's caseload shifted repeatedly from one law firm to another. This eventually proved unworkable, and the 1849 Charter revision established an independently elected chief executive officer known as the Corporation Counsel, and a staff of five, known as the Law Department.

As the Law Department grew, the Corporation Counsel became an important figure in City affairs. In 1856, Corporation Counsel Lorenzo Shephard filed an injunction against his boss, Mayor Fernando Wood, to protect Central Park's development from unlawfully falling under Wood's control. This case gave the Corporation Counsel's Office an independent identity as a protector of the City and its people.

Today, the Law Department is an institution where spirited legal minds handle a vast array of City cases while serving the public. The current Corporation Counsel, Zachary W. Carter, noted: “I am honored to serve the City, work with the Mayor on major Administrative initiatives, and explore topics of key legal importance, including the role of justice in what we do.”

As the 52nd Corporation Counsel, Mr. Carter leads over 700 attorneys and 650 support professionals in 16 varied divisions, including Environmental Law, Contracts & Real Estate, Family Court, Labor & Employment Law, Tax & Bankruptcy Litigation, and Tort. The office proudly and proactively encourages diversity hiring among all staff. The Corporation Counsel, who acts as New York City's chief attorney, also serves as legal advisor to the Mayor and all City agencies.

The Law Department has resided in many locations over the years, including City Hall. Today, it has offices in all five boroughs and in Kingston, New York. Visit the Law Department's website at [www.nyc.gov/law](http://www.nyc.gov/law).



Photo By: Thomas Dowling, NYC Law Department Alumnus