

Spotlight on Jen Duggan, General Counsel

By Joanne Garton, Agency of Natural Resources

Long before General Counsel Jen Duggan learned the words “litigation”, “enforcement” or “rulemaking”, she knew the meaning of two others: “Cancer Alley”. Born in south Louisiana, Duggan regularly travelled the route from Baton Rouge to New Orleans to visit family as a young girl. The infamous stretch of the Mississippi River is lined with over 100 industrial and chemical plants and oil refineries, a sight that left a big impression during her formative years. Said Duggan, “Although it took me years



to articulate it, this place helped me understand the connections between our physical and mental health and a healthy environment. Looking back, I know these experiences as a little girl drove me to environmental law.”

Duggan, a Vermont Law School graduate, began her position as General Counsel this past March. Prior to joining the Agency, she was Managing Attorney with the Environmental Integrity Project, a non-profit organization committed to reducing illegal pollution from industrial plants and promoting equal access to a clean environment. Duggan represented citizen groups impacted by coal and refinery pollution in Maryland, Pennsylvania, Texas, Louisiana, and Illinois. “I worked hard for transparency and to hold federal and state governments accountable to local communities harmed by pollution,” she said. “Now, I feel fortunate to help our leadership take actions that further the Agency’s mission and transparent government.”

As the General Counsel, Duggan heads the Office of General Counsel and manages the legal services for the Agency. The Office of General Counsel provides legal assistance and services to the Office of Planning, Department of Environmental Conservation, Department of Fish and Wildlife, and Department of Forests, Parks and Recreation. The range of legal services includes drafting and reviewing policies and permits, rulemaking and providing general advice on Agency matters. The attorneys in the Enforcement and Litigation Section also represent the Agency in litigation before the Environmental Court and other administrative bodies, Act 250 proceedings, and enforcement matters.

Duggan notes that one of her favorite parts of the job is working together with the Agency's scientists and technical staff to protect Vermont's natural resources and public health. "I have learned so much from our technical staff these past few months," said Duggan. "It is inspiring to work with folks that are clearly dedicated to the Agency's mission." Although Duggan's legal background is firmly rooted in environmental law, her prior management and leadership experience is improving how the Agency operates on the inside. Recently, Duggan helped finalize a transition to centralize the Agency's legal services—a move that will help the lawyers better respond to the diverse needs of the Agency and provide more opportunities for cross-training and professional development.

In the near future, Duggan will continue to evaluate and refine how the Agency's legal team can better serve the needs of the Agency and the public. Agency lawyers work across Departments with scientists and technical staff to review energy and other development projects, issue permits, promulgate rules, and enforce laws to protect the environment and public health. "I want our lawyers to be seen as leaders and problem-solvers within the Agency and by the public," said Duggan.

Strong leadership and a commitment to public process and transparency are just a few reasons that Duggan jumped at the opportunity to work for the Agency this past spring. She came to Vermont Law School because of its outstanding environmental law program, but left after graduation to work in Washington, D.C. Duggan jokes, though, that she began plotting her return to Vermont the day she left. So although her past lies over 1,500 miles away, Duggan's future soundly lives here. "Vermont has always felt like home," said Duggan. And Vermont is fortunate to have her.