More work needed to recruit, promote women, minority lawyers, partners say

Brown Goldstein Levy LLP in Baltimore offers a disability-rights fellowship to a fledgling attorney with a disability, which managing partner Sharon Krevor-Weisbaum hopes debunks a persistent and naïve view that only able-bodied individuals can represent clients on legal matters. ‘There’s been an underemployment [of the disabled] because of incorrect assumptions that people have made over the years,’ she says. ‘That is a battle that we are still involved in on behalf of our clients.’

‘Incorrect assumptions’
Brown Goldstein Levy LLP has for the past seven years offered a disability-rights fellowship to a fledgling attorney with a disability.

The Baltimore firm’s managing partner said she hopes the recruiting effort debunks a persistent and naïve view that only able-bodied individuals can represent clients on legal matters. The firm counts two disability advocacy groups among its major clients: the National Federation of the Blind and the National Association of the Deaf.

“There’s been an underemployment [of the disabled] because of incorrect assumptions that people have made over the years,” said Sharon Krevor-Weisbaum. “That is a battle that we are still involved in on behalf of our clients.”

The fellowship sends a “signal that we understand the mission and advocacy of the disability groups, that we understand what they are saying and believe it.”

With regard to female attorneys, Krevor-Weisbaum said it does not hurt the firm’s recruitment efforts that its managing partner is a woman.

“Having a woman in my seat sends a very good signal to young women,” she added. “I think that’s a signal to the community that there is advancement for anyone at the law firm who can excel. There are no barriers.”

Kathleen S. Hardway, co-chair of Venable LLP’s diversity committee, said the Baltimore-based firm is very involved with the Leadership Council on Legal Diversity and is a sponsor of the National Black Law Students Association convention. The firm participates in networking events with these two organizations devoted to increasing opportunities for minority attorneys, she added.

Venable also has groups within the firm designed to assist in the success of its minority and female attorneys, including a section called Wave, or Women at Venable, said Hardway, who co-chairs the diversity committee with Nora E. Garrote. The internal groups focus on training, mentoring and networking “to retain and ultimately promote from within,” Hardway added.

Growing the pipeline
Increasing opportunities for minority attorneys, however, depends largely on raising the number of minority law students — an effort that must begin with encouraging younger at the college and even high school level to consider legal careers, Hardway said.

“There just needs to be a greater pool,” she added. “That’s a dialogue that’s ongoing for us right now.”

Lerch, Early & Brewster Chtrd.’s managing partner, Roger G. Brewer Jr., conceded that minority attorneys constitute a small percentage of the Bethesda firm’s partners and associates despite a strong recruitment effort through the Bar Association of Montgomery County.

“We haven’t fulfilled the mission that we set out to accomplish,” Brewer said. “It’s not for want of trying.”

Brewer said the firm has in recent months hired two minority attorneys, one as a senior associate and another at a mid-level associate.

“It’s not enough,” he added. “We are striving for more.”

The recruitment, retention and advancement of women, minority and disabled lawyers at Maryland law firms has improved in recent years but more work is needed, say senior attorneys at leading firms.

Baltimore lawyer Ferrier R. Stillman, a partner at Tydings & Rosenberg LLP, recalls the early days of her 30-year career when professional role models were few for young female attorneys. Sandra Day O’Connor had made history in 1981 by becoming the first woman appointed to the U.S. Supreme Court, which spurred law firms to enhance their recruitment of female attorneys.

Now, 35 years later, the efforts are geared toward ensuring women advance to partnership and management positions, where they can not only serve the firm’s clients but attract more business, Stillman said.

“It’s a different atmosphere than it was back then,” she added.

But a recent National Association of Women Lawyers survey found that law firms continue to be inhospitable to women striving for partnership. The 2015 survey of the 200 largest firms in the United States found that women account for 18 percent of the equity partners at law firms, an increase of just 2 percent from 2006. The survey also found that a typical female equity partner is paid 80 percent of what a typical male equity partner is paid, down 4 percent from 2006.

While women have accounted for 50 percent of law school graduates for the past 15 years, they comprised 44 percent of associates in 2015, a drop from 45 percent in 2006.

Outreach efforts
Amid these statistics, Tydings & Rosenberg has adopted an internal “women in business” group specifically designed to mentor its female attorneys in business development and marketing to advance them on the partnership track. Stillman said. She characterized the group as a gender-inclusive version of the old boys’ network and the old male partners solicited when male partners and associates solicited clients on the golf course and in fraternal organizations.

“Typically, men did sports, marketing, together. They belonged to clubs,” Stillman said. “We’re trying to organize similar networking opportunities for younger women attorneys.”

Tydings & Rosenberg makes similar efforts to attract and retain minority attorneys through recruitment efforts at law schools with diverse student bodies, Stillman said. These efforts are not difficult in Baltimore, she added, noting the diversity of students at the University of Maryland Francis King Carey School of Law and the University of Baltimore School of Law.

The firm has also recruited from the Howard University School of Law in Washington, a historically black school.

Minorities account for 7.52 percent of law-firm partners and 22 percent of associates, according to the National Association for Law Placement.

Stillman said recruiting and ensuring that women and minorities advance within the firm is not just a feel-good effort or step required by equal-employment opportunity laws but a necessity in Baltimore’s diverse business and consumer market.

“It is the right thing to do and it is very smart for business,” Stillman said.

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