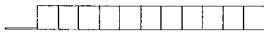


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Chicago Bar Spearheads Plan To Promote Women Lawyers

By Nora Lockwood Toohar

In an ambitious diversity plan, the Chicago Bar Association is urging firms to promote more women into partnership positions.

Also dubbed a "Call To Action," the plan aims to boost leadership opportunities for women lawyers working in private firms. Goals include increasing the number of female equity partners, practice group leaders, committee chairs and managing partners.

So far, 42 law firms - including all of Chicago's top 25 firms - have signed onto the program.

Diversity consultant Jane Pigott, who chaired the Chicago bar's Call to Action subcommittee, said that while 40 percent of the new associates joining Chicago law firms over the last five years have been women, the percentage of women partners continues to lag.

As of 2003, the average percentage of women partners in the top 20 Chicago law firms was 18 percent, which is actually slightly higher than the national average of 17 percent, according to the National Association for Law Placement.

But Pigott noted that because most large firms have two-tiered partnerships, the number of women equity partners is probably much lower.

"If you look at the percent of women equity partners in Chicago, it's very low compared to the percent of women they're hiring," she said. "The other thing is

it is it hasn't grown," she added. "It's not changing."

In the past six years, the percent of women partners at Chicago law firms has increased less than three percentage points, from 15.87 percent. According to Pigott, women are also under-represented as office heads and practice group leaders.

"We're not putting women into power positions in the city of Chicago," she said.

Bar associations in New York, Los Angeles and San Francisco have launched similar efforts.

The Chicago program - launched in January 2005 - calls for firms to reach specific goals by Dec. 21, 2007, including:

- Increasing the percentage of women partners by 3 points;
- Having women represented on every law firm committee in the same proportion as the number of women partners;
- Boosting the number of women practice group leaders;
- Reviewing flexible hours policies to ensure that alternative schedules are a option; and
- Improving any disparity in the rates in which men and women are retained, promoted and laterally recruited.

"We decided we were going to focus on leadership because recruitment does seem to be the problem; retention and promotion seem to be the problem," Pi said.

She doesn't believe law firms consciously discriminate against women.

"I spent over 20 years in three different law firms, and that's not what I saw," she said. "It's just new and different in figuring out how to make an institution that works well for a certain type of person work more broadly. It requires change."

For example, Pigott continued, "The track to partnership perfectly overlaps with the fertile years for having a child if you choose to. So, in order to retain women and be in a position to promote them, having a flexible or reduced hour option is viable becomes the only way you can keep people in the workplace."

Linda Myers, a partner in Kirkland & Ellis, said her firm was one of the first 10 firms to sign the Call to Action.

"It's an exciting thing, and the funny thing is every major firm in Chicago and a lot of the smaller firms are committed to it," she said.

Kirkland & Ellis had already been trying to increase leadership opportunities for women, according to Myers. She added, however, "To try to rally together has been really great."

Myers said she has been involved in hiring at her firm for about five years. With three children - aged 3, 5 and 7 - she knows how difficult it can be juggling ca

and family commitments. That's why she said she's especially enthusiastic about the effort to encourage more flexible schedules.

"My hope is as we all turn to making the environment more family-friendly, we are able to keep more women in our ranks," she said.

Questions or comments can be directed to the writer at:
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