

Columbus law firms will work together to increase number of minority attorneys in city

Diversity effort led by Columbus Bar Association; Law schools, minority bar association also participate

Twenty of Columbus's largest law firms - in an unprecedented cooperative effort initiated by the Columbus Bar Association (CBA) - announced today a plan to significantly increase the number of minority attorneys recruited, hired and promoted by their firms.

The racial diversity initiative also includes the CBA; the John Mercer Langston Bar Association, which is comprised primarily of African American attorneys; and The Ohio State University College of Law and the Capital University Law School.

"We are acutely aware that in Columbus, as elsewhere, the legal profession has not achieved sufficient diversity," said Carl Smallwood, president of the Columbus Bar Association. "We are committed to increasing the number of attorneys of color hired, trained, retained, and invited to join the partnership ranks of the city's law firms."

Symbolically, the diversity effort was announced on the 47th anniversary of the U.S. Supreme Court's landmark school desegregation decision in *Brown vs. Board of Education of Topeka, Kansas*, which outlawed forever the "separate but equal" doctrine of education.

"While there has been considerable progress in race relations since that time," Smallwood said, "there is much work yet to be done. As attorneys -- who understand better than most the meaning of the words 'Equal Opportunity' -- the Bar Association and the managing partners of the city's major law firms saw an opportunity to make a concrete contribution toward increased racial diversity in our profession."

The initiative grew out of a study of their own firms conducted by the managing partners in the fall of 2000. The survey showed that of 1,237 attorneys in the participating firms, only 28 attorneys -- 2 percent of the total -- were African American. Attorneys of Hispanic, Asian American and Native American descent represented less than 1 percent each of the total.

The National Association for Law Placement reports that in 2000, minorities accounted for 3 percent of partners and 15 percent of associates at large law firms nationwide. Lawyers for One America reported in the same year that minorities represented approximately 10 percent of all lawyers nationwide.

Over a period of several months, the managing partners continued to meet to develop the

final plan. Co-chairs of the effort were two managing partners: Alex Shumate of Squire Sanders & Dempsey, and Ben Zox of Schottenstein Zox & Dunn.

The plan commits each of the participating firms to specific objectives and action steps designed to attract minority candidates to the city, increase the number of minorities hired out of law school, and create an atmosphere that encourages minority attorneys to advance in their firms and ultimately become partners.

While each firm will develop programs that meet their own specific management structures and cultures, each of the firms agreed to specific action steps, such as:

- Establishing at least one substantial minority hiring initiative -- such as a summer employment program, establishing clerkships or offering scholarships -- that is designed to attract and retain minority law graduates.
- Establishing mentoring programs for new attorneys -- and particularly new minority attorneys -- that ensure they will have the greatest possible opportunity to advance within their firms.
- Reviewing their own hiring criteria to ensure they do not disproportionately screen out minority candidates.
- Actively recruiting at law schools with significant numbers of minority law students.
- Increasing the number of minority attorneys hired laterally.
- Conducting racial and ethnic/cultural sensitivity training and diversity training programs in their firms. The training programs would be mandatory for the firm's leadership, and all attorneys in the firm would be strongly encouraged to participate.
- Publicizing and promoting the commitment to diversity through their marketing and recruiting materials.

Significantly, the firms also agreed to monitor the number of minorities interviewed, hired and promoted within their firms and report the results annually to the Columbus Bar Association. The reports will provide a mechanism for tracking the success of the initiative.

The law schools and the bar associations also agreed to specific action steps that will support the firms' efforts and seek to expand opportunities for students at the college and high school levels to seek careers in law.