

O'Melveny, Gibson Dunn Join Gender Equity Campaign In LA

By Rachel Rippetoe

Law360 (May 21, 2021, 4:03 PM EDT) -- Firms including O'Melveny & Myers LLP, Littler Mendelson PC and Gibson Dunn & Crutcher LLP have joined a campaign to increase gender diversity in their Los Angeles offices, according to a recent news release.

Women Lawyers Association of Los Angeles and the Los Angeles County Bar Association have created a Call to Action 2021 recommending several ways that firms can increase the number of women and LGBTQ lawyers in positions of leadership. The call to action launched this past week, and 16 firms have signed onto it so far.

WLALA and LACBA formed a joint task force to help firms retain and promote more women back in 2007, and this is their latest effort to help firms collaborate on the best strategies for hiring women, particularly to positions of power. The call to action's recommendations include asking firms to always consider at least 30% women and LGBTQ attorneys when hiring laterally and out of law school, and work to increase the number of women in equity partner positions to at least 25% of all firm ownership.

Crowell & Moring LLP partner Jennifer Romano, who serves on the joint task force, told Law360 Pulse that the call to action is useful, because it also includes many in-person events where firm leaders can get together and collaborate on the best ways to improve diversity.

"It's providing an opportunity for law firm leaders to discuss what it is they're doing that's working, what it is they're doing that may not be working," she said. "There are a lot of firms that are trying to accomplish this. And we should be learning from each other."

In addition to the 30% rule of considering women while hiring, called the Mansfield Rule, the task force also recommended that firms create sponsorship programs that go beyond regular mentorship. The programs would pair partners with senior associates, counsel and junior partners to help them craft specific professional growth plans.

Crowell & Moring already has these sponsorship programs geared mostly toward women and attorneys from underrepresented groups, Romano said.

"It's more than just mentoring and having someone to bounce ideas off of," she said. "They're assigned to sponsors whose role is really to understand their practices and their professional development to find opportunities for them, and do some real proactive efforts to help them in their professional

development, and ultimately their promotion."

The call to action also asks that firms keep track of data relating to hiring and promotion opportunities, as well as keeping data on pay and attorney departures categorized by gender, race, ethnicity, disability and sexual orientation. Firms should also consider shifting the culture of their offices by offering more flexible work schedules and anti-bias training for all employees.

Romano said that for firms to make real change in terms of diversity, it takes a lot of structure and implementing a strict set of guidelines when it comes to hiring and promotions.

"Commitment to it means having real programs, real design, collecting the data, paying attention to the data, and talking about it," Romano said. "This is not something that's just going to be fixed organically, if it had, it would have been addressed already, because women have been graduating from law school at equal percentages to men for decades now."

According to data collected by the State Bar of California in 2019, women only make up 29% of all law firm partners in California's private law sector, despite 40% of all private sector attorneys being women.

The campaign's first event, taking place virtually on May 27, will be a panel focusing on women leaving the workforce in the wake of COVID-19 and how firms can work to keep their female attorneys who have shouldered the burden of childcare during the pandemic.

As early as April 2020, economists coined the term "she-cession" to describe the pandemic-fueled economic downturn's effect on the unemployment rate among women. While past recessions took a larger toll on men, the global job loss rate for women last year was 1.8 times higher than it was for men, according to a "Women in the Workplace" study from McKinsey & Co.

However, a report in February did show that the predicted mass exodus of women from BigLaw didn't quite happen. A total of 3,880 female attorneys left the top 200 firms in 2020, about 40% of the overall departures last year — a percentage that is consistent with results from the past three years.

Though to Romano, this data just shows that women leaving law has always been a problem.

"There's always been a certain element of a crisis when it comes to women leaving the legal workforce," she said. "And the statistics and data are showing that women are leaving the workforce more, having to make adjustments as a result of the pandemic. So we already have a problem. And now we have a much bigger one."

Los Angeles isn't the only California county working on diversity initiatives in the legal profession. Earlier this month, firms like Jones Day signed a diversity pledge crafted by a local San Diego County Bar Association.

Romano said that the 16 firms that signed onto the campaign are just the start. She expects many more firms to respond to the call soon.

-- Additional reporting by Cara Bayles and Xiumei Dong. Editing by Nicole Bleier.