

FROM THE UPCOMING ISSUE

Diversity efforts at largest Dallas firms stall

Only two of 20 report minority ranks that reflect entire Texas bar.

Peter Page / Staff reporter
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Little's Frederick Barrow

Nearly all of the 20 largest law firms in Dallas are trying to improve the racial and ethnic diversity of their staffs — but few are succeeding, according to a survey released last week.

The Dallas Diversity Task Force, comprising the local bar associations for black, Hispanic and Asian American attorneys, found that of the firms surveyed and rated on a scale of zero to 100, only two exceeded 70, the score at which the firm mirrors the demographics of the Texas bar.

"The active participation of the firms is refreshing to us but the results speak for themselves," said Vanita Banks, corporate counsel for Allstate Insurance Co. and president of the National Bar Association, the nation's largest association of black attorneys.

"The report shows that African-American and Hispanic attorneys are underrepresented in these large firms relative to the demographics of the Texas bar," Banks said.

The top firm on the Dallas diversity survey was Weil, Gotshal & Manges, with a composite score of 75.8, followed by Akin Gump Hauer Strauss & Feld, at 71.6.

Patience, persistence

"We focused on hiring top-notch, diverse candidates from around the country," said Yvette Ostolaza, litigation partner and hiring partner for the Dallas office of Weil Gotshal. "Their success attracts more people. I encourage other firms to focus on hiring diverse attorneys just as they would focus on hiring the best patent attorney or whatever else you seek."

Gabriela Gallegos, an associate at Vinson Elkins who represented the Hispanic Bar Association on the task force, said firms only a few years into diversity efforts will likely have to be patient waiting for results.

"I have hope. Firms are taking a broader perspective on who are their candidates, but firms tend to underestimate the effort it takes," she said.

Strasburger & Price, the firm ranked last on the diversity survey with a composite score of 27 — or better than twice the 13.1 score in 2006 — began its diversity program four years ago, said

partner Mark Golman. The firm has made a number of minority hires and consistently has up to 25% minority law students in summer internship programs.

"Our pipeline looks good," Golman said.

The Dallas report found that 83% of the firms include diversity in their strategic plans, 95% have a diversity council and more than 60% have retained a professional diversity consultant. Nonetheless, 92% of Dallas attorneys at large firms are white, and very few partners are people of color, the report concluded.

According to the report, 4.3% of all Texas attorneys are black, compared with 2.6% at the 20 largest Dallas firms in the survey. Hispanics are 7% of the Texas bar, compared with 3.5% of the attorneys at the large firms surveyed.

"The firms are doing a lot of different things," said Frederick J. Barrow of Littler Mendelson, who represented the J.L. Turner Legal Association — the black bar association of Dallas County — on the task force.

"The question is whether these activities are patches on their old processes," Barrow said. "Have they eliminated the law school elitism that exists at many firms? Do they recognize that top law students at schools not named Harvard and Yale can perform? If Wal-Mart can recruit people to Bentonville, Ark., I have no doubt these firms can recruit attorneys to work in Dallas."

Marcos Ronquillo, managing partner, president and chief operating officer at the Dallas firm Godwin Pappas Ronquillo, said the survey is a good gauge of the efforts to diversify by big firms in Dallas, but does not address the competition for attorneys of color. His firm was rated first in diversity in the 2006 survey, but due to staff turnover was no longer among the 20 largest firms queried in the 2007 survey.

"We need to account for the fact minority lawyers have a lot of options," he said. "The pool starts out small and there are many career paths. The survey is good for measuring strict, objective results but it does not measure the sincerity of the effort or the competition for minority lawyers."

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