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## Crowell & Moring's Sponsorship Initiative 10 Years Later

By Tracey Read

*Law360 (January 26, 2023, 3:27 PM EST)* -- It's been more than 10 years since Crowell & Moring LLP launched its Sponsorship Initiative — one of the first of its kind in the legal industry — to help retain and advance the careers of women, LGBTQ attorneys and attorneys of color at the firm.

The program has helped the firm nearly double the number of female partners since 2012 and has led to a 165% increase in the number of female equity partners.

Meanwhile, Crowell & Moring's Leadership Development Program is also still going strong. That program was started shortly after the Sponsorship Initiative and aimed to double the number of attorneys from underrepresented groups within five years while increasing the percentage of women and underrepresented lawyers in its leadership ranks.

Together, both programs have significantly increased diversity at the highest levels of the firm.

For instance, female, minority and LGBTQ lawyers now make up 60% of Crowell & Moring's firmwide partner hires, 42% of its management board, 43% of office managing partners, 37% of practice group leaders and 59% of committee leaders.

Crowell & Moring partner Ellen Dwyer, who chairs the firm's executive committee and is a member of its management board, told Law360 Pulse the Sponsorship Initiative has evolved in significant ways since 2012.

"Our focus really was to enhance the experience of our women and diverse lawyers," Dwyer said. "Since that time, we've educated ourselves about what effective sponsorship really entails, both from the perspective of what's a good sponsor — what are our expectations of the sponsor — and what does a protégé need to do to earn sponsorship."

Dwyer recently finished her tenure as chair of the board of the Leadership Council on Legal Diversity, which is made up of chief legal officers and law firm managing partners working to build a more diverse legal profession.

In that role, in 2021 she helped launch its Leaders at the Front campaign, which required all of the council's more than 400 members to make a public pledge detailing the steps they will take to advance diversity, equity and inclusion in their own organizations.

Dwyer's public pledge was to implement annual firmwide implicit bias and ally training, develop and implement client succession plans to ensure an attorney from an underrepresented group is one of three lawyers identified to succeed a senior partner, and conduct annual equity analyses of compensation.

## **The Process**

Typically, 18 to 20 protégés go through the Crowell & Moring sponsorship program each year. Some years the firm is focused on income partners; other times it's associates and counsel.

When deciding on Sponsorship Initiative participants, the firm also aims to be inclusive from a standpoint of geography. Rather than one-on-one sponsor-protégé assignments, there are sponsorship circles of four people.

Dwyer said the firm is focused on two things: enhancing the lawyers' sense of belonging, and tracking protégés' career trajectories as they move from associate, to counsel, to income partner, to equity partner. In addition, sponsored employees are encouraged to pay it forward.

Chahira Solh, a partner in Crowell & Moring's Orange County, California, office and a member of its antitrust and competition group, has had multiple sponsors at the firm and now sponsors others.

"I was lucky enough to have Ellen and a few others who really made it a point to look out for me, to create opportunities for me and give me constructive feedback," said Solh, who is also a member of the firm's executive committee and management board.

Dwyer said the idea of sponsorship is not to find the most influential person in the firm and attach them to a junior lawyer. In fact, sometimes the most powerful sponsorships are between peers.

She added that there's a big difference between having a good mentor and having a good sponsor.

"A sponsor is someone who's prepared to use their own sort of capital, their own influence, their brand, their reputation, their credibility, to advocate for someone else," Dwyer said. "The underlying assumption here is that you're identifying someone who we believe is really excellent, and is committed to be more excellent every day. Because it's advocacy, it's different than mentoring."

Don Smith, the firm's chief talent and inclusion officer and a former practicing attorney at Fried Frank Harris Shriver & Jacobson LLP, said Crowell & Moring just had its largest and most diverse partner class in its 43-year history, with 88% of partners from underrepresented ethnic and gender groups.

That's also true of 68% of firmwide lateral associate and counsel hires last year, up from 58% in 2021, and 86% of the first-year associate class, up from 74% in 2021. Ninety-two percent of the 2022 summer associate class was also diverse, up slightly from 91% in 2021.

## **A Matter of Trust**

Over the course of a year, there are in-person sessions with the circle where members get to know each other on a deep level. Dwyer said the most powerful session is the very first one, a life map exercise.

"You sit down with your circle, and you come in with pictures of yourself over the course of your life,"

she said. "You're talking about: Where did you grow up? What are some of the most significant life experiences you've had? There's usually a lot of tears in the room because people are getting very personal about who they are. And that to me is like the magic of this program and how powerful it is, because it goes to really knowing someone, knowing what they've lived through, and what their experience is. The enormous trust that comes out of even that first session is extraordinary."

Dwyer added that to be an effective sponsor, you have to really know the people you are committing to advocate for, and they have to know you as well.

"They have to trust you enough to say, 'You know what, actually, I don't want to be a partner at a law firm. I'd really like to go work at the Department of Justice,'" Dwyer said. "And they're like, 'OK, I can help you with that.' It's really grounded in trusted relationships and absolute candor and honesty about where you want to go, and then a commitment on the sponsor side to really help get you there. But it all starts in that beginning session, and it's remarkable."

Smith added that the firm stresses an individualized approach.

"Not all women need the same thing. Not all Latin or Black attorneys need the same thing," he said.

Solh estimated that more than 100 partners have gone through the sponsorship program.

"Sponsorship is embedded in the minds of every one of our employees," Solh said. "It's become part of our culture; it's part of who we are."

In fact, partners are asked whom they've sponsored and what they did to help their protégés as part of the firm's year-end review process.

"Often your diverse attorneys are overmentored and undersponsored, and the programs that we have in place here are really focusing on making sure that we are actually doing the sponsorship piece," Solh said.

She added she still has sponsors who look out for her to provide feedback and help create opportunities.

"I feel comfortable if I go out on a limb and it ends up being something that's incorrect, or if I say something that's wrong; they're going to have my back and help me. And I think a lot of our diverse attorneys feel that way," Solh said. "They've got somebody here who's going to give them that chance, so if they do make a mistake, it's not the end of their career. I think that's something that's really important."

--Additional reporting by Matt Perez. Editing by Brian Baresch.