

How GCs Can Keep The 'Essence' Of Their DEI Efforts

By Michele Gorman

Law360, Philadelphia (October 20, 2025, 4:59 PM EDT) -- While shifts this year in federal diversity, equity and inclusion guidelines may have changed the way corporate legal teams track and share demographic information — including for their external counsel — a panel of in-house attorneys who spoke Monday said their work on the issue continues.

"The essence of what we've been doing — I don't think it has changed much," Rippi Karda, associate general counsel at Verizon, said during a panel at the Association of Corporate Counsel's annual meeting in Philadelphia on Monday. "It has always been inclusive; we're just calling it something different and trying to remain compliant, and at the same time, focus on the company's goals, which is to serve our customers."

Karda was one of four lawyers who spoke during an hour-long session focused on the rapid and significant changes to inclusivity and equity regulations in the U.S. so far this year.

Moderator Trina Fairley Barlow, co-chair of the labor employment group at Crowell & Moring LLP, started the session by summarizing some of President Donald Trump's executive orders on DEI.

Among Trump's orders targeting DEI efforts this year is one to terminate diversity, equity and inclusion mandates for federal contractors; another order declares that official U.S. policy will recognize just two "immutable" sexes and reject the identities of anyone outside that binary.

The panelists recognized that companies and their legal teams are in a tough spot between the White House and existing laws, and they tried to offer guidance for organizations aiming to stay compliant, while remaining aligned with their core principles.

David Hubbard, Verizon vice president and deputy general counsel, who stated that he was speaking on his own behalf and not on the company's, said the telecommunications giant is "adapting" to the changing legal and regulatory atmosphere.

For example, Verizon's previous diversity and inclusion office is now a culture and community office within its talent development department, he said. While that's a tangible change in terms of title, the function — that the organization tries to create an inclusive environment for all employees — is similar.

Later during the conversation, Hubbard explained how Verizon's legal department had an "aggressive and forward outside counsel diversity policy" for many years, with an internal dashboard that tracked

the demographic makeup of the lawyers working on the company's legal matters.

"That dashboard, unfortunately, has not been touched in many, many months," he said.

"But," he added, "what I will say, if you hire — and it matters to you — nothing changes. Internally, I think a diverse panel of law firms with different perspectives will always provide the best representation for our company. That hasn't changed at all."

Fairley Barlow said she has heard similar sentiments in her role as a partner at Crowell & Moring.

"What clients say, and what they want, is going to happen," she said. "That's just the nature of the beast. And relationships matter more than ever."

During the session, panelists reiterated that most laws haven't changed, and there's pending litigation over the enforceability of many of the administration's executive orders.

Karda, who also said she was speaking on her own behalf and not on Verizon's, underscored that there must be a corporate response, especially for a company like Verizon, which is a federal contractor.

"You cannot not do anything," she said, adding that Verizon is in a transition phase in its response to changes.

Adding to that, panelist Kori Carew, chief catalyst officer at consulting firm Bridge 68 LLC, stressed the importance of maintaining transparency in company messaging.

"Regardless of what you do within your organizations, it's critically important that you're having conversations about what you're doing and why you're doing it," said Carew, who previously worked at law firms before starting her consulting firm.

It's crucial for company leaders discuss any change: Why are we doing it? How are we doing it? What is really changing in terms of how we show up?

"You can't go from saying, 'We want this to be a place where everybody can show up as their authentic self,' and then the next day, you make changes, and you tell no one, and they find out because they noticed that on the website all the language had been stripped," she said.

"What ends up happening, is you lose morale," Carew added. "You lose loyalty. You have people who don't trust you."

She urged lawyers in the audience to lead and communicate within their organizations in a way that shapes the kind of organization they want to have.

"Because at some point, the dust will settle," she said.

--Editing by Drashti Mehta.