

## Law Leaders Pledge Policies To Diversify Top Of Legal Ladder

By **Anna Sanders**

*Law360 (October 22, 2020, 10:37 AM EDT)* -- Corporate legal officers, law firm managing partners and other industry leaders are making public — and often measurable — commitments to boost diversity at the highest levels in the legal field through an initiative launched Thursday, the program's leaders said.

The Leadership Council on Legal Diversity's "Leaders at the Front" campaign is designed to help topple systemic barriers that prevent underrepresented attorneys from climbing the legal ladder, asking more than 300 members to use their influence to make the industry more equitable and inclusive by publicly committing to making both personal and organizational changes. The council is publishing these commitments online and is providing resources to help members come up with their own.

So far, law leaders have pledged to regularly discuss issues faced by diverse firm talent, sponsor Black attorneys, implement firmwide implicit bias and ally training, track mobility of underrepresented lawyers and ensure a certain percentage of hours are billed by people of color or women, among other changes.

While the coronavirus pandemic and the deaths of George Floyd and others at the hands of police have reignited a national conversation around race and diversity in recent months, the initiative has been in the works for years and is intended to spur actionable policy change at firms and legal departments, said Robert Grey, president of the Leadership Council on Legal Diversity.

"People are writing letters and making statements and we didn't want to do that. We wanted to do something that would have more of an impact, that was arguably more sustainable ... and that would take into account those things that were critical areas of impact in our organizations to advance women and minority lawyers," Grey said. "Only if we take action and we have plans within our organization that are leader-led, transparent, actionable and measurable can we really achieve results."

Publicizing leaders' commitments is meant to help them collaborate and hold them accountable, according to Ellen Dwyer, chair of both the LCLD board and Crowell & Moring LLP's executive committee.

"There's some healthy skepticism about diversity and inclusion initiatives because we've been talking about this for some time," Dwyer said. "We have a determination to stop talking and start acting. ... We are going to do these things. We are going to change the path of the diverse talent in our organizations."

Dwyer's own commitments include a pledge to sponsor two black attorneys at Crowell & Moring this year and next, as well as conducting an equity analysis on pay.

"For years and years and years, white men were sponsoring white men every effectively — like magic," Dwyer said. "So we're trying to ensure that our diverse lawyers are also connecting with leaders of influence who can sponsor them."

Dwyer also pledged to develop client succession plans that would mandate a "diverse" attorney is among a group of three lawyers identified to take over a relationship when a senior partner turns 65.

"It's about ensuring that everyone has the same opportunities to develop those relationships," she said.

The initiative comes after a study commissioned by the council that detailed impediments to success that women and people of color in the industry faced, including limited diversity in law firm and legal department leadership, as well as lack of access to networking and sponsorship opportunities.

While the study found equal shares of men and women aspire to leadership positions at their firms and companies, 67% of male respondents think they can get there compared to just 53% of women, according to the study conducted by nonprofit think tank Coqual, which researches diversity and inclusion in the workplace

Most attorneys of color also aspire to leadership roles, but fewer believe they will achieve this compared to white attorneys, according to the study. Women and people of color are also less likely to feel they're assessed based on the strength of their contributions to a firm or company, and are less likely to be satisfied by their rates of advancement, the survey found.

Only 49% of survey respondents said they believed senior firm and company leadership is inclusive, the study found. While 85% of respondents said they believed senior leadership's support matters most in advancing to more higher roles, only 22% of respondents have sponsors. And 59% of respondents said that race and ethnicity play a role in how sponsorships are awarded, while 58% believe gender plays a role.

Women and attorneys of color also reported higher rates of feeling excluded from informal networks that can help further their careers, the study found.

This data will help law firms and legal departments develop diversity strategies, like sponsorship programs, networking activities, and other events designed to create exposure and relationships, according to Grey.

"We have a chance to really make a difference in an individual's career," he said. "The plans are not static. They continue to evolve, and we will make them better and better."

--Editing by Emily Kokoll.