

VIRGINIA Lawyers Weekly

Group seeks to increase diversity in firm leadership

By: Jason Boleman | March 22, 2021

Historically, leadership in the legal field has lacked diversity and inclusion across race and gender lines.

The Legal Council on Leadership Diversity is looking to correct that.

Entering its 10th year, the LCLD Fellows Program has sought to increase diversity in law firm leadership through an “ambitious, highly structured initiative” that gives Fellows access to development tracks and networking opportunities for diverse mid-career attorneys. The Fellows Program lasts for a year.

The Pathfinder Program, which began in 2015, focuses on early-career attorneys. The LCLD describes the program as designed to “train both in-house and law firm attorneys in critical career-development strategies including leadership and the building of professional networks.” The Pathfinder Program lasts for seven months.

Richmond lawyer Robert Grey Jr., the LCLD president, said that the program creates opportunities to increase retention in law firms of minority lawyers that might see fewer chances at career advancement than their counterparts.

“These programs are focused on helping that generation of lawyers that might be affected at that stage in their career, to have more access to what it takes to be successful in organizations,” Grey said. Grey emphasized that the programs are crucial in developing relationships and networks with fellow program members.

“There is a constant drumbeat of connecting with each other, building and maintaining relationships and expanding their network,” Grey said. Both Fellows and Pathfinders have access to speaker series, networking events and meetings that allow for member attorneys to accomplish this.

While Grey said that the program has been an in-person program “from its inception,” the COVID-19 pandemic has forced the LCLD to transition to virtual meetings. Fellows traditionally attend three class meetings throughout the year-long program, but for 2021 they will be conducted virtually “until it is safe to meet in person again.” Pathfinders have two meetings during their program, again held virtually due to the pandemic.

Once completing the program, Fellows and Pathfinders are admitted to the alumni group, which consists of more than 3,000 members who previously completed the program. This includes some that Grey refers to as “two-fers” who have completed both the Fellows and Pathfinders programs. Alumni hold events and programming year-round to remain in touch and “continue the LCLD experience.”

The program has proven successful in expanding diversity in leadership roles, with Grey saying that some graduates of the Fellows program have gone on to become general counsel in their companies. Additional graduates have obtained other higher leadership positions, either in their organizations or with another organization.

“What we’ve learned is that they have made it very clear that when they reach out to either hire additional lawyers

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Representation of minority groups in leadership positions has proven to be an issue cited by LCLD program graduates. A 2020 survey of 198 LCLD alumni commissioned by the LCLD and conducted by Coqual found that women and attorneys of color are less likely to believe that they belong because of a lack of leadership diversity. In addition, attorneys of color surveyed “don’t see advancement as a possibility” due to a lack of diversity in upper management. Ultimately, the study states that without an increase in diverse leadership, “attorneys will perceive any [diversity and inclusion] work as ineffective.”

“We have more work to do,” Grey said, noting that there was an “unrealized goal of inclusion” identified by half of the participants. “Sponsorship as part of career development is absolutely critical, and women and minority lawyers see less of that opportunity than their white male counterparts.” Grey emphasized that leaders must show a strong desire for a higher balance of diversity in order for meaningful progress to be achieved.

“That is sort of where we are at this point of asking our leaders, those who are members of LCLD, to have a higher personal commitment and to think more strategically about their diversity practices,” Grey said.

With the new class of Fellows and Pathfinders set to begin their programs this spring, Grey said that the program has proven successful and has grown year-to-year.

“The enthusiasm from the participants I think continues to indicate that this type of training, this type of exposure to members and to each other is very important for retention purposes at our member organizations,” Grey said.

The class of 2021 contains 418 Fellows from across the LCLD’s member organizations. The 10 Fellows from Virginia are:

- Latoya Asia, Dominion Energy Inc.
- Kelley Butler, Freddie Mac
- Nancy Chu, Freddie Mac
- Farisa Dastvar, Willis Towers Watson
- Teirra Everette, Dominion Energy Inc.
- Jenny Kim, Volkswagen Group of America, Inc.
- James Marky, Booz Allen Hamilton
- Margaret Martin, Capital One Finance
- Ramika Stephens, State Farm Insurance Co.
- Mona Thakkar, Volkswagen Group of America, Inc.

The 2021 class of Pathfinders includes 404 members. The eight Pathfinders from Virginia are:

- Chris Alderman, Hunton Andrews Kurth LLP
- Leila Aminpour, Volkswagen Group of America Inc.
- Troy Jackson, Dominion Energy Inc.
- Nicholas Johnson, Volkswagen Group of America Inc.
- Varsha Mangal, Nestle USA Inc.
- Selene Medina, Freddie Mac
- Ogechi Muotoh, VMware Inc.
- Joseph Son, Freddie Mac

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