

Diversity and Inclusion highlighted at inaugural MiLW event

Speakers examine efforts to diversify legal profession

By: Thomas Franz in News Stories October 24, 2019

“Be intentional.”

That was the common refrain from speakers at the inaugural Diversity & Inclusion in the Legal & Business Environment Oct. 17 at Western Michigan University Cooley Law School in Auburn Hills.



Photo by Brad Ziegler

The event, presented by *Michigan Lawyers Weekly* and *Color Magazine*, featured speakers and a panel discussion about how to increase diversity and inclusion in the legal industry.

WMU-Cooley Professor Martha Denning Moore provided opening remarks before giving the floor to keynote speaker Donnell R. White, senior vice president, chief diversity officer and director of strategic partnerships for TCF National Bank.

The hour-long panel discussion was moderated by Aaron V. Burrell, co-chair of Dickinson Wright PLLC’s Diversity & Inclusion Committee. The four panelists were Ayanna Alcendor and Jehan Crump-Gibson, co-founders of Great Lakes Legal Group; Lawrence Garcia, corporation counsel for the City of Detroit; and Alannah M. Buford-Kamerman, co-chair of Plunkett Cooney’s Diversity and Inclusion Committee.

Darlene King, executive director of the Michigan Diversity Council-MIDC, rounded out the program with a speech that highlighted inclusion initiatives nationwide.

Statistical context

During many portions of the event, speakers provided statistics to illustrate the shortcomings of the legal industry in reflecting the general population in its workforce.

White mentioned several numbers in his speech to show that overall representation of minorities in the legal profession has remained stagnant for 20 years.

White said of 1.2 million lawyers nationwide in 2018, 37 percent were women and 16 percent were minorities. In metro Detroit, White said of the 500 partners in the area, 25 percent were women and 6.2 percent were minorities.

While providing context to a pair of his early questions for the discussion panel, Burrell cited the National Lawyer Population Survey to state that in 2007, 4 percent of active attorneys identified as African American and another 4 percent identified as Hispanic. By 2017, those numbers rose just 1 percent each.

Burrell noted that the most recent census data showed that African Americans made up 13.3 percent of the total U.S. population, and Hispanics stood at 17.8 percent.

For law school graduates, Burrell said African Americans, Hispanics and Native Americans made up 20 percent of the group, but they only represented 7 percent of law firm partners and 9 percent of general counsels of large corporations. In major law firms, Burrell said only 3 percent of associates and less than 2 percent of partners are African Americans.

Intentional action

To combat those figures, several of the speakers spoke about the need to be intentional in the way hires are made to increase minority representation in the legal profession.

Garcia was the first to bring up the issue of intentionality. He said of the 125 employees at the City of Detroit Law Department, about 65 percent are African Americans.

“When I make hiring or promotional decisions, I intentionally try to favor a bias for African Americans,” Garcia said. “I think it’s very important for the outward facing portion of the law department to look like the city. I don’t see anything wrong with that.”

Garcia said he has been criticized for it by employees who have said they were offended that part of the reason they were hired was because they are black, but that hasn’t persuaded him to change.

“I don’t care. I believe it’s the right thing to do and I think we need to move past the shame and stigma of being intentional about race in trying to get to a point of equal representation,” Garcia said.

During her speech, King noted the importance of having an intentional plan and strategy for addressing diversity and inclusion.

“You’re only going to attract what you put out. If you bring in a diverse talent, it’s important that there are some mentoring programs and there are support opportunities for them so they don’t feel like they are the only one there,” King said. “In every step of the way, you have to be intentional.”

Pipeline initiatives

Another recurring theme of the event was establishing pipeline efforts so there is greater exposure of the legal profession to younger minorities.

“We have to identify who’s the next Ruth Bader Ginsburg, Sonia Sotomayor or Thurgood Marshall, who were great contributors to our society. Are we doing all we can do to ensure that pipeline is loaded?” White said during his keynote speech.

Buford-Kammerman said during the discussion panel that firms and lawyers should not be afraid to reach out to start establishing pipeline efforts at the elementary and middle school levels.

“Reach back farther than just law school and undergrad. Get into middle schools. For me, personally, it was so hard to become an attorney because I hadn’t known anybody who was one. I didn’t know what the path was,” Buford-Kammerman said.

Crump-Gibson said she conducted a program at Detroit Mumford High School and many students told her she was the first lawyer they had ever met.

“Your average black child is not getting exposure to lawyers,” Crump-Gibson said. “Exposure is needed. When I speak to kids, I say not everyone is going to be a lawyer, but you have to cultivate passion so that when they see people who look like them doing a job, that can help.”

On top of pipeline work, the speakers also noted that once the pipeline is effective, further efforts are needed to retain minority attorneys.

“It’s really important to be ready to include those diverse candidates that you’re bringing in,” Alcendor said.

“Nobody wants to be at a place where they don’t feel part of a team, so structure needs to be in place where there’s inclusion and there are opportunities to speak when you’re at the table.”

To further the case for diversity and inclusion efforts, White showed that businesses that have already done so are reaping the benefits economically.

White said companies whose workforce is reflective of the marketplace are outperforming their peers by 35 percent, and teams where men and women are equal earn 41 percent more revenue.

“There’s a preponderance of evidence for this case for diversity and inclusion in the legal profession,” White said.

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