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Diversity at law firms holds steady in 2009, survey shows

By Alison Grant, The Plain Dealer
 October 28, 2009, 4:25AM

CLEVELAND, Ohio -- The percentage of women and minorities in law firms continued to gradually increase in 2009 in some markets.

The rates were slightly higher in many cities. In others -- apparently driven by layoffs and reduced hiring -- diversity levels fell, said James Leipold, executive director of the **National Association for Law Placement**.

Leipold's organization has polled firms for 17 years on their level of women and minorities. Firms have made steady, slow progress on diversity, though total changes since 1993 have been "only marginal," Leipold said.

Cleveland -- along with Boston, Minneapolis and Pittsburgh -- is average in 2009 with respect to women and lags on minority representation.

Cleveland's number of female partners gained from 2008 to 2009, rising from 18.2 percent to 19.9 percent. Minority representation among partners fell from 4.1 percent to 4 percent. Minority female representation among partners fell from 1.6 percent to 1.4 percent.

"It's a really complicated and complex issue," said April Miller Boise, partner-in-charge of **Thompson Hine**, a Cleveland-based firm known for strong women and minority initiatives.

Thompson Hine focuses on training and mentoring women and minorities, and making sure they have a crack at working with the firm's most important clients, Boise said. Leadership is key, she said, "showing people this is a culture and an atmosphere where they can succeed if they work hard."

Findings from the annual poll of U.S. firms -- ranging from 700-plus mega-firms to boutiques with 50 or fewer lawyers -- show robust numbers for women and minorities in law schools and among new associates entering law firms.

But when it comes to making partner -- having an equity stake in firms -- their numbers fall sharply. Explanations for the dropoff include a shortage of child-friendly work schedules; a lack of supportive networks and mentoring within firms; and persistent stereotypes and racial biases.

Women constitute about half the nation's law school graduates, but less than 20 percent of partners, the legal association's survey of about 139,000 lawyers in more than 1,500 offices found.

Minorities make up about 22 percent of law school graduates and a similar portion of new



Thompson Hine

April Miller Boise, partner-in-charge of Thompson Hine: Leadership is key "showing people this is a culture and an atmosphere where they can succeed if they work hard."

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associates, yet only 6 percent of partners nationwide. Minority women are particularly scarce among those making partner. They compose about 13 percent of law school enrollments and less than 2 percent of firm partners.

Looking more narrowly at 45 cities with the biggest attorney populations, including Cleveland, reveals geographic differences.

The portion of women among partners ranges from a low of 10.8 percent in Salt Lake City to a high of 24.4 percent in San Francisco.

Percentages for minority partners range from a low of 1.7 percent in Cincinnati to a high of 23.5 percent in Miami. These two cities are also the pole ends for minority women partners -- from a low of .5 percent in Cincinnati to a high of 6.3 percent in Miami.



Hahn Loeser & Parks

At Hahn Loeser & Parks, transactional partner Craig White said he's concerned that firms are meeting their diversity targets without advancing many blacks.

At **Hahn Loeser & Parks**, transactional partner Craig White said he's concerned that firms are meeting their diversity targets without advancing many blacks.

"Sometimes they lose focus and forget that this all started for redress of the specific exclusion of African Americans," he said.

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