

DIVERSITY • EQUITY • INCLUSION

Recruiting and Retaining People of Color in Local Law Firms

MINORITY CLERKSHIP PROGRAMS CAN HELP



Trevor A. Mason
Barnes & Thornburg LLP

There are many conversations in the West Michigan legal market about how to maintain relevancy in what is considered many times to be a saturated market. One item that should be a part of each of those conversations is the importance of strong recruitment efforts and the subsequent retention of people of color in law firms.

Local programs such as the Grand Rapids Bar Association and Floyd Skinner Bar Association Minority Clerkship Program provide significant value to achieve the goals of recruitment at law schools and can serve as a model for what can be done to improve recruitment.

Let's start with a notion that I think many can agree on: Diversity of thought and perspective can bring an added value to solving clients' ever-evolving legal issues in the 21st century. Lawyers from minority and historically disadvantaged backgrounds offer perspective and ingenuity that can bring a breath of fresh air to a legal profession that can be slow to change.

If a firm is not doing all it can to bring in talent that can provide innovative problem-solving, that firm will limit itself as to the clients it can serve and the scope of business it can obtain. Improving the recruitment and retention of people of color will also allow firms to better serve a community in West Michigan that has vastly changed over the last decade and continues to be a growing, popular destination for new, diverse residents and businesses. New and existing businesses and stakeholders in West Michigan continue to ask for diverse teams of lawyers to serve their needs.

Many communities in West Michigan have not

been known for having high percentages of diversity in the legal community. It can be difficult to convince people of color at various stages of their career to come to West Michigan because younger attorneys of color do not have many attorneys who look like them in the legal community. What's worse, they do not see many attorneys of color in high-level positions such as partners or managing partners. This leaves younger attorneys of color with a feeling that there are not many opportunities in law firms and little opportunity for advancement.

This is where programs like the Minority Clerkship Program can be pivotal to changing the narrative. The Minority Clerkship Program provides a unique opportunity for first-year law students to receive training and development on various legal skills and soft skills at law firms through a paid internship. This experience also provides access to professionals and mentors in the legal field that can help future attorneys of color understand what it takes to succeed in a law firm.

I know first-hand the opportunities the program can provide and am proud to be part of a firm that participated. West Michigan law firm involvement in retention and recruitment efforts would showcase a grassroots level of commitment to increasing diversity within the legal profession and aligns with broader organizational goals of equity and inclusion the Grand Rapids Bar Association is seeking to achieve.

Let's continue to have conversations and ask ourselves: ***What can we do to enhance recruitment and retention efforts of people of color in the West Michigan legal market?***