Creating a More Diverse and Inclusive PBA

In 1987, then-PBA President Joseph J. Jones appointed an ad hoc committee to determine how the association could increase its level of service to minority lawyers. Although more minority lawyers had begun to enter the legal profession, Jones saw how few minority lawyers were serving on PBA committees or attending PBA functions.

From the ad hoc committee sprang what is now the Minority Bar Committee. It became a formal PBA committee in 1988. Philadelphia lawyers Michael H. Reed served as the committee’s first chair and Tiwen M. Law served as the committee’s first vice chair.

One year later, 1989, the committee would hold its first statewide Minority Attorney Conference. The large-scale annual event was held every year until 2017, when the decision was made to alternate annual gatherings between the Minority Attorney Conference and the PBA Diversity Summit. To date, the committee has held 30 Minority Attorney Conferences and 10 Diversity Summits. In addition, along with the PBA Diversity Team, the committee has held three Minority and Women Lawyers’ Business Development Forums. The PBA Diversity Team was established in 2010 based on a recommendation of the PBA Diversity Task Force and works with PBA leadership, staff and all PBA related-groups and entities (including the Pennsylvania Bar Foundation, the Pennsylvania Bar Insurance Fund and Trust Fund, PABAR-PAC and the Pennsylvania Bar Institute) to promote and enhance diversity.

Shortly after the founding of the Minority Bar Committee, efforts were made to expand opportunities in PBA leadership. 1991-92 PBA President Thomas L. Cooper noted that in the nine-plus decades of PBA history that preceded his term, no minority person and only one woman had served on the Board of Governors. Cooper created the Task Force on Women and Minorities in the PBA to find solutions that would be more inclusive and increase the representation of woman and minority members on the Board. Based on the task force’s recommendation, the PBA’s bylaws were changed to add two new at-large seats to the Board of Governors, one for a minority governor (a second minority governor seat would be added in 2011) and one for a woman governor.

In 1993, Germaine Ingram of Philadelphia served as the secretary on the Board of Governors, making her the PBA’s first African-American officer.

In 2004, Reed, who had served as the Minority Bar Committee’s first chair, became PBA president.

Another milestone was reached in July of 2011 when Janis M. Leftridge was named the association’s first diversity officer. Leftridge, who had an extensive background in human resources and diversity development, oversaw the PBA’s efforts to improve diversity within the association and Pennsylvania’s legal profession. She died unexpectedly two years after joining the PBA. She was succeeded by Trent Hargrove, who had previously been chief diversity officer for the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania and chief counsel for the Pennsylvania Department of General Services. Like Leftridge, Hargrove works with the PBA Diversity Team to develop and execute the PBA’s diversity and inclusion programs and with the state’s legal community to provide resources and tools in support of diversity and inclusion goals and initiatives.

Although programs and services in key roles throughout PBA history can be highlighted, diversity numbers in membership cannot. The PBA has never collected information about race and ethnicity as part of its membership registration process. The Supreme Court of Pennsylvania began collecting such data by including a voluntary self-identification question during its 2018-19 annual attorney registration. According to the court’s most recent summary of results released in January 2020, of those answering the question, 9.1% self-identified as belonging to a minority racial or ethnic group. The Supreme Court only reports the data in aggregate so the PBA is unable to compare the court’s reported results with PBA membership.

The sources for this information include the Special Centennial Edition of The Pennsylvania Lawyer published in July/August 1995. More information about the Minority Bar Committee is available at https://www.pabar.org/site/For-Lawyers/Committees-Commissions/Minority-Bar

Our trivia contest celebrating #PBA125strong is underway. Two questions a month will be posted to PBA’s Facebook and Twitter pages. Members with correct answers will be entered into a monthly prize drawing (12 prizes total). More on the rules: www.pabar.org/site/125Strong/triviacontest.