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Women post gains in law firms that joined initiative

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A dozen Chicago law firms have made significant gains in the number of women in the partnership ranks since 2004, according to the results of a project undertaken by The Chicago Bar Association's Alliance for Women.

"That's a very material increase in a short amount of time," said Jane DiRenzo Pigott, who led the Call to Action project along with Jenner & Block LLP partner E. Lynn Grayson. Pigott is managing director of R3 Group LLC, a diversity consulting business.

The Alliance for Women launched Call to Action in 2004 to address the disproportionately low percentage of women attorneys in leadership positions. According to the Alliance, 44 law firms and six legal departments are signatories to the Call to Action goals.

At an event last week, the Alliance released the results of the Call to Action, including the finding that 12 of the law firms had increased their percentage of women partners by at least 3 percentage points from January 2004 to December 2007 based on figures submitted to the National Association for Law Placement. They are Bryan, Cave LLP; Seyfarth, Shaw LLP; Schiller, DuCanto and Fleck LLP; Ungaretti & Harris LLP; Skadden, Arps, Slate, Meagher & Flom LLP; Chapman and Cutler LLP; Perkins, Coie LLP; Hinshaw & Culbertson LLP; Foley & Lardner LLP; McDermott; Will & Emery LLP; Meckler, Bulger, Tilson, Marick & Pearson LLP; and Katten, Muchin, Rosenman LLP.

The Alliance's own survey found similar results, including that Bryan, Cave had the largest percentage increase in women partners, at 19 percent.

The Call to Action also recognized the 10 signatory firms with the highest percentage of women partners in their Chicago offices at the end of 2007, regardless of whether

they met the goal of a 3-point increase. They were Schiller, DuCanto and Fleck LLP; Cassidy, Schade LLP; Sonnenschein, Nath & Rosenthal LLP; Tressler, Soderstrom, Maloney & Priess LLP; McDermott, Will & Emery LLP; Ungaretti & Harris LLP; Barack, Ferrazzano, Kirschbaum & Nagelberg LLP; Katten, Muchin, Rosenman LLP; Neal, Gerber & Eisenberg LLP; and Burke, Warren, MacKay & Serritella P.C.

Pigott said the Call to Action increased awareness of the need to retain and promote women lawyers. According to the most recent NALP figures, women constitute about 45 percent of associates at Chicago law firms.

In 2004, when the Call to Action began, the percentage of women partners in Chicago was 18.12 percent. The most recent NALP figures show that has risen slightly to 19.65 percent.

"We weren't focusing on the pipeline anymore because the pipeline has been full for a very long time," Pigott said.

Instead, the Call to Action looks at the number of women in partnership and other powerful positions within firm.

"We felt like the signatories to the Call to Action stepped up and responded," Pigott said.

Among the other findings of the survey, more than 50 percent of the law firm signatories increased the number of women practice group leaders by the end of the Call to Action. All signatory firms now have a reduced-schedule policy, and nearly 63 percent promoted attorneys working reduced schedules to partnership, either equity or non-equity.

Pigott said the Alliance for Women is considering the possibility of working with the Coalition of Women's Initiatives in Law to create an annual report card for law firms assessing their hiring and promotion of women.

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