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How A Utah Nonprofit Pushes For Diversity In The State's Bar

By **Daniel Connolly**

Law360 (September 28, 2023, 4:19 PM EDT) -- A recent Federal Bar Association panel highlighted an expansive effort to diversify the legal profession in Utah, including a new nonprofit center with a full-time staff dedicated to recruiting and retaining more lawyers from underrepresented groups.

The Utah diversity efforts were the focus of a Sept. 22 panel at the FBA's annual convention and meeting in Memphis, Tennessee. Panelists urged attendees to consider implementing similar programs in their own states.

The background: A 2020 survey from the Utah State Bar concluded that the legal profession in the state was still 70% male and 90% white.

That's less diverse than other states in the region, such as neighboring Colorado, said Jonathan Wayas, associate director with the Utah Center for Legal Inclusion, or UCLI, a nonprofit organized in 2017 and formally launched in 2018.

The launch of the center was part of a broader effort to diversify the state's bar led by a coalition of organizations that includes the state bar, the FBA, the state's law schools, as well as legal organizations for women and minorities.

Key people who pushed for founding UCLI were two young lawyers: Kristen Olsen and Melinda Bowen, along with a then-state Supreme Court Justice, Christine M. Durham.

In a keynote speech at a UCLI fundraiser last year, Justice Durham said she came of age during a time of overt discrimination.

"When I was at Duke University and graduated in the early '70s, none of the major law firms from New York, Atlanta, Washington would even interview women," she said, according to a recording of the speech. "They specified that they would interview law review participants that were men."

She described her experience in the law. "Because of my age, I was the only woman in the room for a long time, in almost every setting."

But she expressed gratitude to some men who went out of their way to help her, including one lawyer who hired her to his firm and taught her securities law.

She said the legal profession should measure results and work toward greater diversity and inclusion not only because it makes business sense, but because it's the right thing to do.

UCLI has two full-time staffers, an administrative assistant and a rotating number of interns and volunteers, Wayas said.

He said the group based its structure on similar centers in Colorado and in Illinois.

One of the center's biggest programs is a certification process for Utah law firms. The firm must designate someone in their leadership to act as a contact person for UCLI, and set diversity-related goals for the year.

Participants also commit to either sponsoring a UCLI event or holding an in-firm training, Wayas said. This year, 65 firms are working through the certification program.

Other major ongoing programs include an internship that allows undergraduate students to work with UCLI and get a taste of the legal profession, and a symposium at local universities that introduces students to what it takes to go to law school and succeed.

UCLI and the numerous organizations it works with are also proponents of mentoring people at all levels, Wayas said.

The efforts seem to be paying off, he said.

"We can point to people who have been an intern with us, and gotten a scholarship from us and are now in law school," Wayas said, adding there are about eight such people.

"I think in the next couple of decades, as we mature and progress, I think we'll have the data to show how effective we are."

The recent U.S. Supreme Court decisions in **the Students for Fair Admissions** cases place new restrictions on how universities can consider race and are expected to have implications for other areas of American life.

Wayas said the ruling may impact the two law schools that UCLI works with closely: the University of Utah's S.J. Quinney College of Law and Brigham Young University Law School.

But he said the Supreme Court ruling may have a limited impact on what UCLI itself does. He said the organization has already had an expansive sense of what diversity means, including not only racial and gender diversity, but LGBTQ+ orientation and support for students who are first in their family to pursue this level of education.

The center also supports another important diverse constituency in Utah: students from rural areas, Wayas said. Most of Utah's population lives in Salt Lake City and nearby counties, and rural areas are often short of legal services.

"We're not changing anything we do," Wayas said. "It's just maybe somehow how we talk about things. I think we've always done this, like, 'This is open to everyone, but we encourage people from these backgrounds to apply.'"

--Editing by John C. Davenport.