

The Work of the Connecticut Bar Association's Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion Committee

Just over ten years ago, the Connecticut Bar Association (CBA) began serious efforts to enhance its commitment to the advancement of diversity and inclusion, both internally and externally. Among the CBA's many purposes, as commemorated in its Constitution, is to "to promote diversity within the Bar and the Bench." On March 23, 2015, the CBA House of Delegates unanimously adopted its first diversity and inclusion policy, providing as follows:

The Connecticut Bar Association is committed to diversity in its membership, officers, staff, House of Delegates, Board of Governors, executive committee, sections and committees, and their respective leaders. Diversity is an inclusive concept encompassing gender, gender identity, race, color, ethnic origin, national origin, religion, sexual orientation, age, and disability.

We are a richer and more effective association because of diversity, as it increases our association's strengths, capabilities, and adaptability. Through increased diversity, our organization can more effectively address member and societal needs with the varied perspectives, experiences, knowledge, information, and understanding inherent in a diverse relationship.

Unanimously approved by the CBA House of Delegates on 03/23/15.

The CBA's Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion Committee subsequently adopted its first strategic plan¹ on October 5, 2015. The DE&I Committee is co-chaired by the Hon. Cecil J. Thomas, Hon. Tejas Bhatt, Attorney Ron Houde, and CBA President Tim Shearin. Attorney Mallori Thompson serves as vice-chair of the Committee. The Committee's efforts are led by dedicated volunteers, many of whom have been actively involved with the Committee for over ten years. Since 2015, the Committee has developed and maintained a number of programs and ongoing initiatives, some of which are summarized briefly below.

The Connecticut Legal Community's Diversity and Inclusion Pledge and Plan

In 2016, the Committee launched the Diversity and Inclusion Pledge and Plan. Over 40 organizations are current signatories to the Pledge, which includes a multiyear plan to guide the development and implementation of an organizational diversity, equity, and inclusion Plan. The Signatories meet periodically to discuss their efforts and to learn from each other, most notably at the annual Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion Summit each year.

The CBA's Annual Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion Summit

Every year since 2016, the Committee has organized an annual Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion Summit, which features a day of learning and inspiration to guide

and inform organizational diversity, equity, and inclusion efforts. The ninth Summit was held on October 25, 2024, and featured a diversity metrics presentation given each year by the Hon. Cecil J. Thomas, an interactive workshop presentation led by Dr. Arin Reeves of Nextions, Inc., a presentation by Dr. Kenji Yoshino, Earl Warren Professor of Constitutional Law at NYU School of Law and the Director of the Meltzer Center for Diversity, Inclusion and Belonging, and a keynote address by Richard Robinson, Retired Chief Justice of the Connecticut Supreme Court. The Summit was attended by approximately 150 attendees. Planning is currently underway for the Tenth Annual Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion Summit, which will be held in October of 2025.

The Constance Baker Motley Speaker Series on Racial Inequality

The Constance Baker Motley Speaker Series was launched in 2020, as a collaborative effort of the CBA Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion Committee and the Connecticut Bar Foundation James W. Cooper Fellows Education and Programming Committee. The committee honors the legacy of the Hon. Constance Baker Motley. Judge Motley was born in New Haven and served as the first African-American woman federal judge in the United States, after a long career of high-impact civil rights litigation and many notable political and civic accomplishments. The series is now in its fifth continuous year

and features consistent virtual educational events throughout the year on a wide range of topics related to racial equality in the United States. This year, the series featured a screening of the documentary *Refuge*, with a question-and-answer session with co-director and co-producer Din Blankenship. Additional sessions this year will explore the history of slavery in Connecticut and immigration law.

Education

In addition to educational offerings such as the Annual Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion Summit, the Committee has helped produce the Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion track at the Connecticut Legal Conference (CLC) each year. These educational offerings have grown from one or two sessions at the outset of the Committee's efforts to a full day of offerings at the CLC each year. The Committee often partners with sections and other organizations, such as the Lawyer's Collaborative for Diversity, to produce these sessions. The most recent CLC, held on June 10, 2024, featured sessions entitled: "DEI and the Law: Challenges and Initiatives"; "Creating a Safe and Welcoming School Environment for Transgender and Non-Binary Students: Beyond Sports and Bathrooms"; "Understanding the Invisible Disability & Discrimination Against Neurodivergent Attorneys"; and "Drafting and Implementing LGBTQ+ Inclusive Policies and Procedures for Law Firms and Companies." Planning is underway, led by Committee Vice Chair Mallori Thompson, for this year's Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion track at the CLC.

LAW Camp

LAW Camp is a one-week, in-person summer camp sponsored by the Committee. LAW Camp offers high school students a unique opportunity to learn about the legal profession and develop critical and analytical thinking skills. During the week-long day camp, attendees learn from practicing lawyers and judges, observe court proceedings, receive advocacy training, and participate in a mock trial competition. The camp, which is offered at no cost to students, returned to an in-person format during the summer of 2024. Planning is

underway, led by Committee Co-Chair Ron Houde, for the 2025 LAW Camp, which will be held in July of 2025. LAW Camp offers opportunities for attorneys and judges to volunteer as hosts for observation sessions, and as judges and coaches for the attendees' mock trial efforts.

Future of the Legal Profession Scholars Program

The Future of the Legal Profession Scholars Program accepted its first cohort of scholars in 2019, and has accepted new scholars on a rolling basis each year since the program's inception. The Scholars Program offers a full scholarship to a live LSAT preparation course, and participation in at least one year of educational programming and mentorship, covering topics such as law school admissions and financial aid, personal statement guidance and review, and "speed networking" with attorneys practicing in a wide range of practice areas and contexts. The Scholars Program is open to all juniors, seniors, or recent graduates of Connecticut-area colleges and universities with a commitment to pursuing a law degree at an accredited Connecticut-area law school, or pursuing a legal career in the Connecticut-area in the future. Preference is given to first generation law students (meaning students who would be the first member of their immediate family to attend law school) with a demonstrated commitment to advancing diversity, equity, and inclusion in prior academic, professional, or personal pursuits, or who are able to demonstrate that the applicant has overcome adversity or other challenges in the pursuit of a fu-

ture career in the law. Since 2019, 45 aspiring law students have been accepted into the program. Two members of the first cohort, Christina Cruz and Natasha Claudio, have since completed law school, and have now been admitted to the bar as practicing attorneys.

These are just some of the initiatives of the Committee. The Committee also maintains model diversity, equity, and inclusion plans for sections and committees, undertakes an assessment of the CBA's diversity, equity, and inclusion efforts every two years, and is currently planning for a Speaker's Bureau, to provide education and training to organizations on topics such as implicit bias and inclusive leadership. The Committee also produces this column each issue of the *CT Lawyer* magazine, which this year has included spotlights on some of Connecticut's affinity bar associations working to advance diversity, equity, and inclusion within the Connecticut bar and beyond. All of the efforts described here are guided by dedicated subcommittees, which are always in search of new members. Interim Director of Diversity Jenn Shukla offers invaluable support to all of the work of the Committee.

Interested in becoming involved in one or more of the Committee's programs and initiatives? Email DEI@ctbar.org to express your interest in participating. The Committee would welcome your commitment and support! ■

NOTES

- https://www.ctbar.org/docs/default-source/resources/strategic_diversity_and_incl.pdf?sfvrsn=37a9d7cd_0