

Chicago Daily Law Bulletin®

Volume 151, No. 183

Monday, September 19, 2005

Minority firms unite to serve corporations

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Eighteen minority law firms in the U.S. that serve corporate clients are banding together to seek business as an alliance.

Three of the firms joining the National Minority Law Group are from Chicago, more than from any other city.

The 18 firms comprising the alliance are Hispanic-owned, black-owned, Asian-American-owned and women-owned shops with a total of about 500 lawyers between them.

"What we're trying to do is be a minority-owned alternative to large national firms," said partner Francisco J. Gonzalez, of the Miami-based law firm of Adorno & Yoss, which calls itself the largest minority law firm in the U.S.

The NMLG is the brainchild of Henry N. "Hank" Adorno, founder and president of that firm.

The alliance aims to offer national corporations "the same depth and seamless delivery of services" that national law firms do by linking together established minority law firms from most metropolitan areas, Gonzalez said.

Among the criteria for joining the NMLG is that each member firm must "be devoted primarily to corporate representation," Gonzalez said.

"It has been a chore just to be able to find member firms that qualify," he added.

Many minority law firms, he said, are "devoted to being plaintiff lawyers," rather than representing corporations.

The Chicago law firms that are charter members of NMLG are, in alphabetical order, Greene and Letts; Pugh, Jones, Johnson & Quandt P.C.; and Sanchez, Daniels & Hoffman LLP.

"By bringing these firms together under this umbrella, corporate counsel of major corporations can then come to one database and have at their fingertips law firms that have already been pre-checked and pro-approved by the admissions process into the group," said Hugo Chaviano, partner at Sanchez, Daniels.

Among the recent events serving as an impetus behind formation of the National Minority Law Group, according to Stephen H. Pugh of Chicago's Pugh, Jones, was a meeting of corporations, including Shell Oil, General Motors, Wal-Mart and DuPont, and representatives of minority law firms in Washington, D.C., last November.

The conference was held, according to Pugh, "to answer the question of why we have not been sustaining the minority-owned law firms and why they

have been vanishing."

There, Pugh met Hank Adorno, who was trying to put together a directory of minority law firms that practice in the corporate area.

This meeting led to Pugh's firm joining the NMLG.

Attorney Eileen M. Letts of Chicago's Greene & Letts said another corporate initiative that may be advantageous to creation of the NMLG is a Call to Action authored by Roderick A. Palmore, chief legal officer of Sara Lee, last October.

That document calls on other chief legal officers to "reaffirm" their commitment to diversity in the legal profession and to hire minority law firms.

But the roots of the NMLG go back farther still.

Gonzalez said he and Adorno "have been working on this thing for almost two years."

Adorno & Yoss with 250 lawyers has been rapidly expanding in recent years. The firm merged this year with White & Wiggins, a black-owned law firm in Dallas. Adorno & Yoss also expanded into New Jersey and Los Angeles recently and plans a presence in Chicago.

At one point, Gonzalez said, he and Adorno considered merging all of the potential members of NMLG into one law firm.

"We did consider that, but it's not very likely," he said.

"We've all put in too much time and effort and dedication to build each of our firms to the point where we are ... and I don't see the need to merge if we're able to deliver services in a seamless fashion," Gonzalez said.

The problem minority law firms face, according to Gonzalez, is that big corporations in recent years have tended to hire law firms "that can deliver services on a national basis."

"Minority suppliers are being forced to work toward increasing their geographical coverage, being national," Gonzalez said.

"That's why we promoted the idea of the National Minority Law Group," Gonzalez said. "It allows each one of us to bid for contracts that were reserved to national, big firms before."

An example of the nationalization trend was the move by Allstate Insurance Co. in the spring to reduce the number of outside law firms it hires for corporate work from as many as 400 to just 13.

Eight of those 13 law firms that Allstate now calls its "premier law firms" have national reach.

Jon C. MacKay, assistant vice president and assistant general counsel of Allstate, said that even with the creation of the National Minority Law

Group, "the lion's share of our work is going to go to the premier law firms, and the members of NMLG are not among those, with the exception of Adorno."

Still, MacKay said, "There is a certain amount of work that will always go to" firms not on Allstate's "preferred" list.

"For instance," he said, "we don't have a PLF in every city in this country."

"NMLG suddenly provides us with a very big network of additional counsel that we could access for situations where we would need somebody other than, or in addition to, a PLF," MacKay said.

The new alliance also provides Allstate with a new way of fulfilling its diversity goals, he said.

Among the criteria for membership in NMLG, Gonzalez said, is that the firms must be certified as minority owned by the National Minority Supplier Development Council Inc. or an equally recognized certification agency, such as a city or state government.

The firms also must have a record of experience in dealing with corporate clients and have the technology that corporations require.

Chaviano said the firms also must be "AV rated" through the legal database operated by LexisNexis Martindale-Hubbell. They also must pass a due diligence exercise of documentation, technical audit and interview carried out by NMLG's membership committee, Gonzalez said.

The group's Web site was expected to go online on Monday, Gonzalez said, at www.nmlg.org.

Asked whether any similar minority law firm alliances exist, Pugh cited the National Association of Minority and Women Owned Law Firms that was formed in 2001.

He said NAMWOLF tends to have more female-owned law firms as members than NMLG. "While we have women-owned law firms in our group, we tend to want to be minority," Pugh said.

The other original law firms in NMLG and their headquarters are: Atkins & Evans in Los Angeles; Blackwell, Igbunugo in Minneapolis; Brown & Hutchinson in Rochester, N.Y.; Brown & Sheehan in Baltimore; Escamilla & Poneck in Houston; Fields & Brown in Kansas City, Mo.; Fitzhugh, Parker & Alvaro in Boston; Gonzalez, Saggio & Harlan in Milwaukee; Lafayette & Kumagai in San Francisco; Lewis, Munday in Detroit; Roberts & Bishop in Indianapolis; Wilson, Petty, Kosmo, Turner LLP in San Diego; and Wong, Fleming in Princeton, N.J.; and Bordenave, Boykin & Ehret, a New Orleans firm that has temporarily suffered some disruption due to the hurricane.