

Setting the tone

Chicago chapter of the Coalition of Women's Initiatives in Law leads way for national group

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Marcia Owens

[Marcia Owens](#), a partner at [Honigman's](#) Chicago office, has seen the Coalition of Women's Initiatives in Law's success grow since its inception. She joined the group when it launched in 2008 in Chicago and remains an active member.

"I still sit on both the Chicago and national boards. [I] co-chair the national programming committee," she said.

The Chicago chapter's success demonstrates how female attorneys in New York and Washington D.C. could launch their own chapters. Chicago remains the largest chapter in the coalition and has the most committees and programs, according to Owens. One method the group uses to attract members is to offer activities that don't necessarily apply to the legal profession, such as cooking and candle-making classes.

"[There's] more interest in people wanting to do something fun as opposed to hard-charging CLE topics we had historically done," Owens said. "People just getting together and getting to know each other."

In April, the group hosted its annual Spring Networking Special, a dinner event at RPM Events in River North that attracted about 60 attendees. The coalition selected Amy Siegfried as its keynote speaker. She is a motivational speaker who offered advice for people to turn conversations into career moves and "move beyond small talk to create genuine conversations."

Still pushing for equity

With the Trump administration attacking diversity, equity and inclusion initiatives, Owens and her coalition's national programming committee felt it was critical to inform its members about the current best practices, legal landmines and predictions about the future of DEI.

The group cosponsored a Jan. 26 virtual event, hosted by the Coalition of Coalitions, which included the Coalition of Women's Initiatives in Law. The event featured David Glasgow from the Meltzer Center for Diversity, Inclusion, and Belonging at the [New York University School of Law](#) and Kenji Yoshino, the school's faculty director and constitutional law professor.

"In terms of the mission [of DEI], we're all aligned in terms of the issues and the topics we are facing," Owens said.

Glasgow and Yoshino, according to a March report by Jenny Lee, the editor-in-chief of the Institute for Inclusion in the Legal Profession's blog "Inclusion at Work," said that "... while the legal and political landscape may seem bleak, one of the biggest takeaways from the program is that DEI is not dead — in fact, far from it."

Lee wrote that, based on current law, the speakers offered a memory-enhancing tool for analyzing legal risks in DEI programs. They are referred to as the "Three P's" – Preference, Protected Group and Palpable Benefit. In a nutshell, a DEI program could be in legal jeopardy if:

1. Its preference for a particular group is obvious.
2. Its focus is on the seven protected groups (race, national origin, color, religion, sex, sexual orientation and gender identity).
3. It does not offer a palpable benefit.

Owens said that despite the federal government creating pitfalls for DEI initiatives, she is "impressed" that the common consensus within the legal community has been to keep pushing forward.

"It's a challenging time," she said, adding that she's spent over 18 years promoting advancement of women within law firms. "We still have a long way to go, unfortunately. It's disappointing and I [am] frustrated with it being a setback to the work that me and so many other great people have

taken on over the years.”

But the coalition does not plan to back down.

“We don’t want to change our mission,” she said. “We all still feel that there’s a place for our organization.”

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