

Big Law Must Reach Out, Work With Local Groups to Support Social Justice



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By Vanessa Albert Lowry | **January 29, 2021** | **The Legal Intelligencer**

Since the summer of 2020, lawyers and law firms have joined many corporations and institutions in reaffirming their commitment to diversity, equity, inclusion and social justice. Our profession is a special one that requires us not only to make profits but to justly represent our clients and to further the rule of law and civil society with justice for all. Not all of us work directly in the service of social justice; therefore, it is imperative that we find a way to do and support the work within our firms and fields necessary to build a more just society. At the same time, we, lawyers of all practices and backgrounds, should each strive to take that same energy that grew out of the events of last summer and apply it to the service to communities in which we live and work.

That obligation is clear. How can we best respond? Many law firms have done a great deal: taking on pro bono cases, donating to large charities, and sponsoring events for well-established organizations that have been at work in their communities for generations. We cannot deny the contributions of many of these groups. The NAACP Legal Defense Fund, a frequent beneficiary of big law philanthropy, has an indisputable record of representing many causes for racial justice and supporting Black attorneys as well. Additionally, it recently announced that it will devote millions of dollars to fully financially support Black law students through the length of their studies—another, much needed, step toward a more just society. There are

numerous institutions engaged in related work. For many in the private legal industry, there may be a sense that there is so much more to do. Perhaps the ways that we have tried to right the many wrongs in our society, many elements of which have been built on and supported by interconnected systems of racism and oppression, through supporting advocacy and inviting marginalized colleagues into the fold, might not be the most efficient methods to cure persistent social justice and racial ills today.

Addressing racism and furthering social justice involves more than representation and moral suasion that are the typical tools of the legal profession. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. spoke of the vote but also of jobs programs. Today's activists continue to push for an increase in resources and access to services and opportunity for impoverished communities, largely Black or Latino, or for support for oftentimes transient and vulnerable communities such as LGBTQ youth and forsaken trans people. Grassroots organizations from such communities have firsthand knowledge of the problems afflicting their members and neighbors. Most attorneys, particularly Big Law attorneys, do not. We hold many of the resources that could truly help many of the members of these communities. Because of this, in addition to making large contributions to and work with large charities, we need to look at and be open to directly assisting the many newly created and fledgling community organizations established over the last few years already doing good work that addresses the most immediate needs of their own communities and regions.

What are the tools at our disposal?

One way is to support public service lawyers working directly with smaller groups. Our firm, Greenberg Traurig, has committed \$5 million over the next five years to support programs that address the causes and effects of systematic racism in our society, and seek to provide impoverished communities and individuals economic, social, and cultural rights. One of the marquee components of this commitment will be supporting the firm's Equal Justice Works fellows dedicated to addressing racial, social, and economic justice issues mostly while working at local organizations and projects. In Philadelphia, we have sponsored and acted as a resource for a number of fellows over the years and learned so much from them and seen the effectiveness of the work they do; as a result this commitment seemed a natural step. Public service lawyers all need resources of many kinds and their work generates so many tangible benefits that there should be a way for most firms to usefully support this work.

In addition, pro bono work remains one of the best ways for lawyers to help the communities that need it the most. Providing volunteer legal services to the underserved and to the numerous civic and charitable organizations, including small, grassroots organizations, dedicated to assisting them, is at the heart of our profession's commitment to justice. At our firm, we look for ways to maximize the impact of our efforts by working with corporate clients and others to leverage our contributions.

Throughout the 2020 elections, thousands of attorneys volunteered with local election watchdogs, already informed of the common means of voter disenfranchisement in their counties and states, to ensure that our country would have free and fair elections, where all who were eligible could vote. This type of service is invaluable.

There are of course thousands of criminal justice-related cases for firms and lawyers to take on, and this can be made most effective by working in conjunction with special organizations such as Unincarcerated Minds, Inc., a Philadelphia-based organization that specialize on supporting the incarcerated and formerly incarcerated.

Major law firms and rock star attorneys also have the power of their platforms and of their pocketbooks. Our ability to support many of these deserving local organizations and funds have not fully been realized. We have the means to uplift local community organizers—folks who turn down accolades and instead seek

out simply the resources necessary to do their jobs effectively. We can assist by offering education and delivering exposure to our networks, as well as providing financial commitments through annual donations and fundraising.

After the recent social upheaval, hundreds of large law firms came together to form the Law Firm Antiracism Alliance (LFAA), to change the way institutions deal with inequality. This is a great and important step, a bold commitment. Commitment alone is not sufficient. We must act on the commitment, then act again. There will always be more to do.

We have heard a loud call-to-action to change the ways that we fight injustice. Now we must support the people doing the critical work on the ground through our own work, our voice and our funds.

—The firm’s marketing and diversity, equity and inclusion teams, in particular Alex O. Longoria, assisted in the preparation of this column.

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