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The 10 Best Law Firms For Black Attorneys

By **Andrew McIntyre**

Law360, New York (May 16, 2016, 7:53 PM ET) -- Ogletree Deakins Nash Smoak & Stewart PC has landed atop Law360's list of law firms with the strongest representation by black attorneys, and the firm credits its efforts to combine diversity with professional development for the headway it has made.

Only 14.7 percent of attorneys surveyed by Law360 identified as minorities, with 2.9 percent identifying as black, 3.4 percent Hispanic, 6.4 percent Asian-American and 1.9 percent as another minority. Just 1.9 percent of partners are black — for nonequity partners, the number is 2.5 percent, and for equity partners the figure is 1.6 percent, according to the survey.

Rank	Law Firm
1	Ogletree Deakins
2	Miles & Stockbridge
3	Constangy Brooks
4	Kean Miller*
5	Leason Ellis
6	Mitchell Silberberg
7	Bowman and Brooke
8	Beasley Allen Marshall Dennehey
10	Fitch Even

** Some attorneys at the firm declined to self-identify a race. Source: Law360 survey data.*

At Bowman and Brooke LLP, 3.7 percent of the firm's partners are black, along with 10.5 percent of its nonpartners, putting it seventh on Law360's list, which takes into account the number of black attorneys at each firm as well as the percentage among partners and nonpartners.

"If we're in the front, it's almost a sad reflection of our legal community," said Alana K.

Bassin, a co-managing partner at the firm.

Some law firms on the list say black attorneys, many of whom only have a few black colleagues, face challenges in getting the support they need to create new client connections and network effectively. Some of the firms say they've sought to address such a lack of support by implementing programs and initiatives aimed at helping black lawyers build a book of business and creating support systems for black lawyers.

"What we've done is to create ... a black attorney resources group, which we developed in the last couple of years," said Ogletree's Michelle P. Wimes, director of professional development and inclusion for the firm. "We tackle things like 'what is your brand,' networking, client development, marketing, and even elevator pitches."

"What distinguishes us is that our firm combines professional development and diversity and inclusion," Wimes said, noting that often, "it will be siloed away from all of the important parts of the law firm."

Ogletree's number of black attorneys is well above the overall average. Forty-eight of Ogletree's 744 attorneys are black, including 19 of its 371 partners, putting the firm's percentage of black partners at 5.1 percent and its nonpartner percentage at 7.8 percent. Ogletree is also the largest of the firms among the top 10.

Seeking to provide a support system Wimes said is absent at many law firms, Ogletree's black attorney resources group does, among other things, a webinar series that meets once a month. The firm also does a retreat every other year.

"Many times with African-American lawyers ... their professional development needs aren't getting met," Wimes added. "It's difficult, I think, when the numbers are not quite there."

Although black lawyers face obstacles to making partner, initiatives at Alabama-based Beasley Allen Crow Methvin Portis & Miles PC, which had the highest percentage of black partners among firms in the top 10, at 12.82 percent, appear to have made the path less difficult at that firm.

Tom Methvin, a principal at Beasley Allen, said the 77-lawyer firm has been supportive of the programs of the African American Bar Association in Alabama and each year takes two or more law clerks from that system.

"When you have complete diversity, you have different points view," Methvin said. "It helps attract clients. It helps understand how juries feel."

"We wanted to have African-American attorneys in each section that we practice," he added. "We do have that."

Bowman and Brooke organizes a training retreat in which lawyers discuss issues of diversity as well as leadership training. The firm is also a member of LCLD, or the Leadership Council on Legal Diversity, and Bassin said the firm's membership in LCLD helps its black attorneys develop more clients.

Bassin said part of the reason the firm has striven to become more diverse is that its clients are expecting a diverse group of lawyers.

"They are diverse. They are international. They want to see diverse trial teams," Bassin said of the firm's clients. "We believe that diversity ... brings better results."

Constangy Brooks Smith & Prophete LLP ranked third on Law360's list, with 9.6 percent of its nonpartners and 6.1 percent of partners identifying as black.

Donald S. Prophete, a Kansas City partner who joined the firm March of last year, said his goal within 10 years of his joining the firm is for the law firm to be "50/50 racially diverse."

Prophete said the firm, which doesn't have a diversity committee, has been successful in attracting a diverse group of partners to join the firm. He said having a diverse group of partners has in turn helped the firm to bring on a more diverse group of associates.

"Because it starts at the top ... we're able to populate the firm in a way that we can be proud of," he said.

Methodology: Law360 surveyed over 300 U.S. firms, or vereins with a U.S. component, about their overall and minority headcount numbers as of Dec. 31, 2015. Only U.S.-based attorneys were included in the survey. Firms are ranked based on three factors: 1) the percentage of partners, both equity and nonequity, who self-identify as black; 2) the percentage of nonpartners who self-identify as black; and 3) the number of attorneys at the firm who self-identify as black.

--Editing by Jeremy Barker and Patricia K. Cole.

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