

Austin Minority Bar Associations Issue Law Firm Diversity Report Card – May 2, 2013

The annual report card issued by the Hispanic Bar Association of Austin, the Austin Black Lawyers Association, and the Austin Asian American Bar Association has expanded in collaboration to now include the South Asian Bar Association of Austin and the Austin LGBT Bar Association. With the reinvigoration of the report card in 2011, the group of minority bar associations has attempted to broaden the scope of data obtained from the law firms in an effort to start moving in a direction of reporting on more aspects of critical importance to the Austin community.

This year, the annual Austin Law Firm Diversity Report Card evaluated and provided a grade for the 27 largest law firms in Austin based on the percentage of minority attorneys in each firm.¹ In addition, the Diversity Report Card Committee collected LGBT data from the law firms in their questionnaire, but voted to not use the data in this year's report card. However, next year's report card will likely include the 2013 LGBT numbers that the Committee obtains from the law firms at that time.

Daniel Ramon, Austin LGBT Bar Association President, commented, “The Austin LGBT Bar Association is grateful that the Diversity Report Card Committee included questions about LGBT data and law firm policies affecting LGBT persons in the questionnaire. While our courts continue to debate the status afforded to LGBT persons, it is important that law firms stay attuned to these issues and recognize the unique legal challenges that their LGBT clients face. Such recognition begins with how a law firm supports its own LGBT lawyers and staff.”

For the 2012 report, the Law Firm Diversity Report Card Committee used the fact that minorities comprise 14 percent of all attorneys licensed to practice law in Travis County as the foundation for calculating the grades. Therefore, in order to receive an “A” grade on this year’s report card, a law firm’s Austin office must meet or exceed the 14 percent threshold. Those falling below 8 percent receive a failing grade. Consistent with prior report cards, the 2012 Austin Law Firm Diversity Report Card is again weighted in favor of law firms that have minority partners.

While the 2012 results show the total reported number of minority attorneys has increased in large firms as compared to the total number that were reported in the 2011 report, the number of firms with a failing grade increased, proving there is still much more progress to be made. It was well put by Lisa Tsai, President of Austin Asian American Bar Association, when she states, “As the capitol city, it is vital that we continue to strive to have an attorney pool in Austin that reflects the demographics of the Texas Bar. The Austin Law Firm Diversity Report Card is critical to achieving this objective, and it is encouraging to see that certain Austin law firms have made progress in the last year.”

In addition, this year consideration was also given to law firms that participated in the Austin Bar Association Diversity Fellowship Program by allowing firms to include minority summer clerks in their report to the committee. The Diversity Fellowship Program is a ten-week fellowship to enable first-year law students of the University of Texas to participate in law firm, governmental, and judicial summer internships. The students are competitively selected by the Austin Bar Association Diversity Committee and spend the first five-weeks as

¹ The top twenty-seven Austin law firms were identified using rankings published by the Austin Business Journal in its January 2012 publication along with its October 7-13, 2011 publication.

interns with the state district court judges. Students receive a \$5,000 stipend from the Austin Bar Foundation funded by the participating organizations by charitable donation. The goal of this program is to achieve diversity and inclusion. The Austin firms that participated in the Fellowship Program this year are:

McGinnis Lochridge & Kilgore LLP
Graves Dougherty Hearon & Moody PC
Locke Lord Bissell & Liddell LLP
Armbrust & Brown LLP
Lloyd Gosselink Rochelle & Townsend PC
Thompson Coe Cousins & Irons LLP

Manuel Escobar, President of the Hispanic Bar Association of Austin, observed, “The legal market is maturing to the point that diversity no longer is a simple target or laudable goal for which firms should attempt to strive. It is a necessity. Clients have begun to demand it, and that demand will only grow over time. Rather than simply to keep track of numbers, our groups share an obligation to help our profession and our firms work the goal of a diverse profession. The Report Card is but one of the ways that we will do so. Beginning this year, we also plan to offer assistance, training and even CLE to lawyers in Austin to help firms find, recruit, hire, train, promote and retain diverse attorneys. The journey undoubtedly will be long, but we proudly will do our part to ensure that our profession reflects our shared values and society.”

In reflecting on this year’s report card, Sujata Ajmera, President of South Asian Bar Association of Austin believes that “as our city continues to grow and diversify, it is more important than ever that our legal community follow in stride. The importance of diversity in our law firms cannot be emphasized enough, as it not only results in better representation for our clients, but it is also a more accurate reflection of our clients themselves. The Diversity Report Card is an important tool that allows major law firms in Austin to gauge their diversity efforts and work on ways in which they can improve upon them. We were excited to be included in the Report Card this year, and as a new minority bar group, we hope to continue working alongside our fellow bar members to help promote the hire, retention, and advancement of minority attorneys in the Austin area.”

As was the case in last year’s report card, this year's report card had seven law firms that earned an “A” grade for their exceptional minority recruitment, hiring, and retention efforts. Those firms are:

Greenberg Traurig, LLP
Wilson Sonsini Goodrich & Rosati
Brown McCarroll LLP
Jackson Walker LLP
Vinson & Elkins LLP
Andrews Kurth LLP
Baker Botts L.L.P.

Nine law firms, as opposed to last year’s seven, received failing grades, including five who did not respond.

(For a full list of firms with grades, see the attached 2012 Austin Law Firm Diversity Report Card.)

These results give pause for thought and as a sentiment to that, Rudolph Metayer, President of the Austin Black Lawyers Association, states, "Until the day when the thought of large firms accurately reflecting the public they serve is an afterthought, this Report Card will be needed. We are making our way there, but unfortunately we are not there yet. Thank you to the firms who responded to this survey. We know that you too see the importance of this document and it speaks volumes about where you want to be as leaders of the legal community."

The hiring and retention of minority lawyers is a key objective of the Hispanic Bar Association of Austin, the Austin Black Lawyers Association, the Austin Asian American Bar Association, the South Asian Bar Association of Austin and the Austin LGBT Bar Association. The growing group of minority bar associations have pledged to continue issuing the annual report card and to work with law firms on increasing the number of minority attorneys in their ranks.

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