

The Legal Intelligencer

THE OLDEST LAW JOURNAL IN THE UNITED STATES

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Duane Morris Names Chief Diversity Officer

BY GINA PASSARELLA

Of the Legal Staff

Duane Morris yesterday named Nolan Atkinson Jr. as the firm's first chief diversity officer.

Leading diversity efforts is not something new to Atkinson, who was the founding chairman of the Philadelphia Diversity Law Group and is the current chairman of Duane Morris' diversity committee.

In his new role, Atkinson will report directly to firm Chairman Sheldon Bonovitz and will lead the development and implementation of programs that focus on recruitment and retention of minority attorneys. His primary duty, the firm said, would be to ensure all members of the firm are following Duane Morris' diversity mission statement that mandates an inclusive environment.

Atkinson will create new diversity-related programs and expand existing ones. He will likely focus on mentoring younger lawyers, the firm said.

"Diversity is a major focus of the firm, and we are confident that this new position of chief diversity officer will help us build on our achievements in this area," Bonovitz said in a statement. "We have chosen Nolan, a nationally known force and advocate for diversity within law firms, as an indication of our commitment to one of our highest goals and our clients' principal expectations: a truly diverse attorney base."

Atkinson said he has been actively involved with diversity at the firm for the past decade. In his more official capacity, he said he wants to do better on the day-to-day implementation of diversity efforts. That takes, he said, more than just a diversity

committee, but rather someone who is responsible for ensuring these initiatives are carried out.

"The first benchmark is to work and to have a law firm where diversity is the centerpiece of the firm's operations," Atkinson said.

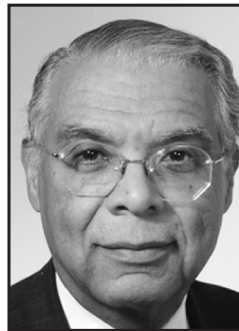
He wants people to come to the firm and want to stay and make sure they are successful lawyers, he said. Atkinson will start with a focus on retention and then look to how the firm recruits laterals and new law school graduates. Duane Morris already has mentoring programs in place, but Atkinson said he would see if they could be strengthened.

Atkinson will spend as much time on diversity efforts as it takes to present the results firm management is looking for, but he said he would absolutely continue to practice.

He is a member of the firm's trial practice group and is a former chairman of the firm's commercial litigation group. He has represented corporations in toxic torts and products liability matters and has worked on health care-related cases.

Atkinson said his practice would fit well with his new duties because he has increasingly counseled clients on diversity issues and antidiscrimination policies.

Under Atkinson's leadership, the Philadelphia Diversity Law Group grew its membership from 12 firms and corporations to nearly 30. The group's 1L summer program also grew, with nearly all of the



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member organizations committing to hire at least one minority 1L for a summer associate position.

Stacy L. Hawkins, the director of diversity for Ballard Spahr Andrews & Ingersoll, said Duane Morris couldn't get anyone better for the firm than Atkinson when it came to naming a chief diversity officer.

He knows the issues and has been active in the community for years, she said. Atkinson would make a "wonderful internal champion and an even better public face," she said.

Despite the fact that Atkinson didn't have a formal title and continued with a full legal practice, Hawkins said he still devoted significant amounts of time to diversity issues.

"He has a passion for this work," she said.

Nearly every large firm is hiring a point-person to manage diversity efforts, and many are looking externally to people who aren't practicing attorneys or who do not have law firm experience, Hawkins said.

Taking someone from inside the firm, as Duane Morris did with Atkinson, is the better way to go, she said. That person will have intimate knowledge of the firm and its attorneys and will bring with them credibility, she said.

K&L Gates was one of the first large corporations to create the position of chief diversity officer and give that position direct access to firm leadership. Carl Cooper came on board in 2003 and left the position in May to start his own consulting firm. K&L Gates hired Richard Jones this week to take over under a new title, director of diversity for the firm's U.S. offices. He came in from an outside consulting group that focused on diversity initiatives.

Large firms are increasingly putting someone in charge of leading diversity efforts

within the firm, whether it is under the title of diversity manager, director or chief diversity officer. A survey done by Altman Weil and the Minority Corporate Counsel Association that was published in February showed that of the largest 200 firms, 50 percent of those who participated in the survey

have a designated diversity manager, which is a 5.4 percent increase from the previous year.

The survey also found that an increasing number — 67 percent — of diversity managers are lawyers in their firms, while 61 percent handle the role full time.

Atkinson said he couldn't speak for other firms when it came to whether a chief diversity officer was necessary to make diversity initiatives meaningful. He said the ability to spend more time on diversity at Duane Morris is a positive step. •