

LAWYERS JOURNAL

ALLY Initiative recruiting its first cohort

By Zandy Dudiak

A new ACBA initiative aimed at championing equality, diversity and inclusion in the legal profession and beyond is recruiting its first cohort for March 2022.

ACBA President Joe Williams launched the ALLY Initiative as his presidential project with a vision to “level the playing field,” something he says is “critical” to the bar and the community at large.

The acronym ALLY stands for “Attorneys, Learning as allies, Living as allies and Yielding results.”

The mission of the initiative is to engage attorneys and their law firms, corporate legal departments, courts and other legal organizations to commit to increase inclusivity, create equitable workplaces, empower historically marginalized and underrepresented members of the bar, and reflect the community through active participation in various key programs and projects targeted to achieve those objectives.

The committee creating the ALLY Initiative is co-chaired by Laura Bunting and Regina Wilson. Williams carefully chose the committee members to represent the ACBA’s key affinity group divisions and sections.

“The goal here is to introduce the idea that fairness is essential to all groups,” Bunting said.

“He made a purposeful attempt to include people to have a better program. There’s no other bar association in the country that focuses on allyship.”

The plan is to have an initial cohort of participants from different-sized law firms, corporate legal department and potentially the judiciary, according to Wilson. Committee member Carol McCarthy, original chair of the Women in the Law Division, said the cohort size will be about 15 to 20 individuals.

“Pittsburgh is a great place but there are a lot of things that need work – not just in the legal community,” said Ron Jones, who is heading the subcommittee that will screen cohort applicants. “This initiative is one way of making progress. You have to start somewhere and somehow.”

The call for applications was announced in the December 9 issue of the ACBA *Sidebar*. The application period will run from January 6 through February 4. The subcommittee will review the applications during February to meet the March 15 kickoff date. The first cohort would graduate in November 2022.

“It’s pretty exciting to see who’s going to become part of this,” Jones said. “We want to create a space where participants are challenged but have support.”

Those selected for the initial cohort will actively participate in various key programs and projects targeted to achieve the program objectives. They would pick and choose activities from a criteria list designed to increase exposure to diverse groups. The activities would be broken down into different



levels, some easier to achieve and others a bit more challenging.

While the criteria list has not yet been finalized, committee member Charles DeMonaco said the draft provides a good overview of the program.

The initiative will require cohort members to participate in a prescribed number of activities at four different levels. Participants will be required to complete five activities in the first level, three in the second level, two in the third level, and at least one in the fourth level. Below are just a few examples of the proposed activities:

- Level I:
 - Attend an event hosted by an ACBA affinity group
 - Participate in the ACBA’s diverse law student summer clerkship program
- Level II:
 - Revise screening policy for job applicants to remove markers with the potential for implicit bias (i.e., name, age) from the initial application
 - Implement a community outreach program to under-represented groups to encourage participation in elections and access to voting
- Level III:
 - Hold an implicit bias training with at least 50% of the firm/organization required to attend
 - Engage a significant portion of the company’s leadership to participate in the ABA’s 21-day Racial Equity Habit Building Challenge
- Level IV:
 - Create a lactation space, or a lactation space policy/protocol
 - Retain a consultant to examine firm compensation to ensure that pay is fair and transparent for attorneys and based on years of experience and other tangible metrics

Wilson said participants will be encouraged to learn new things and challenge themselves. While a new cohort would start each year, Wilson said there would also be a recertification process in 2023 for those who graduate from the initial cohort.

“It’s always important to be striving toward inclusion and work on being an ally,” Wilson said. “We can never be too inclusive.”

The initiative reflects the ACBA’s mission “to empower our members; promote a just, accessible, and inclusive judicial system; and serve the community at large.”

“As champions, we must do more than let the under-represented speak for themselves,” Williams continued. “I don’t believe the burden should always be on them to champion.”

“Being an ally doesn’t mean you have to apologize for your own success and accomplishments,” he added.

Jones said some individuals, companies and firms don’t know how to start addressing inclusion.

“There are members of our legal community who recognize the importance of this,” Jones said.

While those involved in creating the initiative are still working on the project, Williams said he’s “amazed at some of the creative ideas” the group has come up with.

“I couldn’t be more pleased,” Williams said. “This initiative is everything I hoped it would be and more. Every lawyer in our association and members on those committees we serve will benefit from a more inclusive legal profession. It shouldn’t be viewed as only benefitting the underrepresented.” ■