

## 40 DC Firms Honored In Effort To Improve Access To Justice

By Alison Knezevich

*Law360 (June 1, 2023, 3:36 PM EDT)* -- Forty law firms in Washington, D.C., have qualified for an annual campaign recognizing those that donate a certain percentage of their revenue to local legal services organizations, the D.C. Access to Justice Commission announced Thursday.

Altogether, the firms donated \$7.3 million in 2022 to organizations serving low-income residents, the most since the Raising the Bar campaign began more than a decade ago, the commission's executive director, Nancy Drane, told Law360 Pulse.

With poor residents facing increased legal needs in the COVID-19 pandemic's wake, commission leaders and civil legal services providers say the effort highlights the importance of private firms' contributions.

"The leadership of D.C. law firms is crucial in helping guarantee access to justice in the District," commission chair Peter B. Edelman said.

Vulnerable populations "are still feeling the ramifications of the pandemic and will continue to feel those for a long time," Drane said in an interview. Legal services organizations are seeing an increase in the need for help in areas such as housing and domestic violence, among others.

The end of pandemic-related aid, such as boosts to food stamps, has taken a toll on those served by local groups.

"We've gotten more calls from families who can't make it to the end of the month," said Judith Sandalow, executive director of the Children's Law Center in D.C. "They just can't

### Law Firms Raising the Bar in D.C. Leadership Circle

**The firms earned honors at three levels — platinum, gold and silver — for donating 0.11%, 0.09% or 0.075% of D.C. office revenue, respectively.**

Platinum level donors +

Gold level donors –

- Buckley
- Crowell & Moring
- Klein Hornig
- Mayer Brown
- Orrick
- Paul Weiss
- WilmerHale

Silver level donors +

Source: District of Columbia Access to Justice Commission

provide enough food for their families."

Attorneys can help families maximize their benefits, and law firms' contributions are critical to the center's work, Sandalow told Law360 Pulse.

"When we talk about lawyers, I think so many people picture courtrooms and legal papers," she said. "But I see kids who are able to learn, families avoiding homelessness, parents being able to put food on the table."

The D.C. Access to Justice Commission was created in 2005 by the D.C. Court of Appeals to improve access to the civil justice system.

The Raising the Bar campaign launched in 2010. It aims to increase private firm giving by providing guidance on appropriate levels of law firm giving and a way of comparing giving levels across peer-level firms, Drane said.

In the first year of the campaign, 23 firms participated.

Firms are recognized at three levels, depending on what percentage of their D.C. office revenues they contribute: Platinum for those who gave .11% of revenue; gold for those who gave .09%; and silver for those who gave .075%.

Setting the benchmark as a percentage of revenue, rather than as a fixed amount, allows firms of all sizes to participate, campaign supporters say. Those that qualified for the top tier range from solo practitioners to Big Law giants.

"It's impressive that in the platinum level, you see law offices of a single individual, as well as really large law firms," said Kristin Graham Koehler, managing partner of Sidley Austin LLP's D.C. office.

The campaign's structure also means that as firms bring in more revenue, they must contribute more to qualify.

"We all know that the legal industry did not suffer during the pandemic," said Steptoe & Johnson LLP pro bono partner Paul Lee, who also serves on the D.C. Access to Justice Commission. "As law firms do better, we should be giving back more."

Lee said he appreciates that the campaign focuses on local organizations, reminding lawyers to start with their own neighbors when it comes to giving back.

"We want to make sure that we don't forget about the community that's closest to us," he said.

Another participating law firm, DLA Piper, told Law360 Pulse it considers it important "to support local legal services providers through our pro bono efforts as well as our charitable giving."

"As part of our Washington, D.C., community, we are pleased to support local legal services organizations that are working tirelessly to provide access to justice to our neighbors, especially when the needs in our community have increased as a result of the pandemic," William Minor, the firm's D.C. office managing partner, said in a statement.

This year, local legal aid groups faced the possibility of a nearly 60% funding cut in Mayor Muriel Bowser's budget proposal. The D.C. Council this week passed a final budget that reversed the cut, but the proposed reduction highlighted the vulnerability of public funding, advocates say.

"We learned this year how fragile that is," Sandalow said.

--Editing by Peter Rozovsky.

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