

Diversity, Immigration, Pro Bono Representation Among Top Priorities of Bar Association

South Asian-American members of the New York City Bar Association discuss its wide scope and reach and impact on members and general public alike

— NEW YORK

How to nurture better educated lawyers able to cope with the rapid-fire changes in their profession, diversify membership with active recruitment efforts among women and minorities, expand its involvement in access to justice initiatives, international human rights, and pro bono representation in many areas, including immigration, AIDS, homelessness, and criminal justice are among the top initiatives of the New York City Bar Association, a voluntary association of lawyers and law students based in New York.

Since 1896, the organization, formally known as the Association of the Bar of the City of New York, was founded in 1870 in response to growing public concern over corruption among judges and lawyers in New York City. The City Bar, currently headed by president Carey R. Dunne, who began his two-year term on May 15, 2012, has more than 24,000 members.

According to Eric Friedman, director of Communications at the association, members represent several communities that form the essence of New York City and have origins in countries all over including India, Pakistan, Bangladesh and Sri Lanka. Among the association's top priorities, Friedman said, are encouraging women and minorities in not only becoming members, but holding important positions within the association as well as chairing the various committees and sub-committees.

Devika Kewalramani, partner at Moses & Singer LLP and co-chair of its Legal Ethics & Law Firm Practice, who chairs the association's Professional Discipline Committee, told News India Times that the association boasts of several South Asian members, who are active in its various committees and other outreach programs.

She noted that the association has over 150 committees that focus on legal practice areas and issues.

Through reports, amicus briefs, testimony, statements and letters drafted by committee members, the City Bar comments on public policy and legislation. The City Bar's Legislative Affairs department acts as a liaison between the committees and the New York State Legislature and New York City Council, Friedman said.

Jaipat S. Jain of Lazare Potter & Giacovas LLP, who headed the



Asian Affairs Committee, agrees with Kewalramani. Jain told News India Times, that as a recent law graduate from India, new in New York, he found himself at the City Bar, where he could avail books and reference guides from its extensive library and also seek guidance from established member.

According to Jain, the association prides in harnessing the expertise of the legal profession to identify and address legal and public policy issues in ways that promote law reform, ethics and the fair and effective administration of justice, and a respect for the rule of law at home and abroad.

"Supporting individual attorneys through professional development and assistance, continuing legal education, presentations and networking and career opportunities," are some of the features of the City Bar that stand out, Jain said.

Committees

The City Bar has over 150 committees that focus on legal practice areas and issues and helps the City Bar comment on public policy and legislation and were described by Jain as the backbone of Association advocacy and activity.

Committees are divided in different groups according to the areas they cater to and are chaired by a member. Categories include Business and Finance, Criminal Justice, Entertainment Activities, Governmental Affairs, International Affairs, the Justice System, Media, the Arts and Intellectual Property, Legal Education, Property Issues, Public Service, Social Urban and Consumer Issues and Tax Issues.

The association's Legislative Af-

fairs department acts as a liaison between the committees and the New York State Legislature and New York City Council, and also coordinates the association's legislative activity in the New York State Legislature and New York City Council.

"The Bar encourages various committee members to participate in shaping public policy by commenting on pending legislation, drafting proposed legislation, testifying at hearings, and making lobby visits," noted immigration attorney Cyrus D. Mehta told News India Times. "The scope of issues we address is as vast as the City Bar's 150 committees and ranges from civil rights and criminal law to trusts and estates, judicial administration and legal issues affecting children," he added.

Kewalramani said the committee on Professional Discipline, which she chairs, monitors the role and function of the lawyer disciplinary process in New York. The committee examines the procedural rules governing the disciplinary system and reviews the practices and performance of the disciplinary agencies in New York City; and issues reports and recommends rule and policy changes to the Appellate Divisions and the Office of Court Administration to improve regulation of the legal profession.

The Asian Affairs Committee, which Jain headed, focuses on legal and policy issues and developments relating to Asia and mainly consists of lawyers with origins in Asian countries or having interest in Asia.

According to the City Bar's website, the Committee is cur-

rently engaged in studying the alternative dispute resolution regimes of China, Japan, South Korea, India and Singapore. During the 2010-2011 term, which Jain chaired, the committee hosted several lawyers and judges from each of these countries.

The City Bar's Judiciary Committee evaluates candidates for judgeships on New York City's courts, while the Executive Committee, working with the Judiciary Committee and the Committee on State Courts of Superior Jurisdiction, evaluates candidates for New York's highest court, the Court of Appeals. The Executive Committee, working with the Judiciary Committee, also considers the qualifications of the President's nominees to serve on the U.S. Supreme Court.

Pro Bono Services

Through its nonprofit affiliates, the City Bar Justice Center and the Cyrus R. Vance Center for International Justice, the City Bar provides pro bono legal services in New York City and supports the creation and expansion of pro bono and access to justice in other countries.

The City Bar's member services include career development workshops; networking events; a Small Law Firm Center; the Lawyer Assistance Program, which provides free counseling for members and their families struggling with substance abuse or mental health issues; a law library; discounts on Continuing Legal Education courses; insurance and other benefits; and contact info for the association's members.

Immigration Outreach

Providing immigration assistance as well as influencing various laws and resolutions relating to the issue is among other areas the association focuses on, Mehta said.

The Immigration and Nationality Law Committee addresses diverse issues pertaining to immigration law and policy including issues like prolonged detention of non-citizens, constitutional issues impacting immigration legislation, and questions arising from claims for international human rights protection such as political asylum.

Mehta also pointed out to the association's Immigrant Justice Projects which help immigrants in a variety of ways, including assisting with domestic violence and human trafficking cases, obtaining asylum-related benefits for refugees and providing information about immigrant rights.

Education

The association also provides various avenues for its members to enhance their career with events, programs, the law library and a variety of online resources through its Committee on Career Advancement and Management. Similarly the City Bar Center for Continuing Legal Education is an accredited provider in the States of New York, New Jersey, California and Illinois, offering over 150 live programs a year, as well as audio and video tapes, for members and non-members and hosts a moot court competition.

The City Bar also has a number of programs targeted toward young lawyers and future lawyers.