

How Law Firms Are Supporting Women Lawyers in The Pandemic

This year's celebration of Women's History Month is especially appropriate because it comes during the one-year anniversary of the COVID-19 shutdown. Working women have felt a tremendous amount of pressure in juggling demanding careers with the unprecedented challenges of the pandemic, especially closed childcare facilities and schools and eldercare.

The American Bar Association conducted a survey to understand the impact of the pandemic on the legal profession, particularly on women and diverse lawyers. It uncovered concerning data that all law firm leaders must consider going forward: Just as client demand for diversity is hitting an all-time high, the pandemic may force women to leave the workforce.

"The findings may forecast an exodus from the profession at a time when clients are demanding diverse talent," noted Roberta Liebenberg of the Red Bee Group, which designed and managed the survey. The ABA presented findings of the survey, conducted in fall 2020, on February 17 at its virtual 2021 midyear meeting.

Since COVID-19 began, [women have been exiting the workforce](#) at higher rates than men, according to the Bureau of Labor Statistics.

These reports suggest that even greater challenges lie ahead for women lawyers as our country and our businesses begin to emerge from the pandemic.

Jaffe spoke with several law firms around the country about the impact of the pandemic on women lawyers and how their women's programs have been helpful over the past year.

Women's Initiatives and Pandemic Support

One positive and effective way that many law firms support their women lawyers is through women's initiative programs or groups, which offer opportunities for women at any stage of their careers to connect, mentor and educate each other.

Women of Moore & Van Allen (WoMVA) chair [Meredith Reedy](#) said that the pandemic, while affecting working parents overall at the firm, has had an especially strong impact on working mothers. "Whether juggling work and young children or aging parents, women tend to take the brunt, intentional or not," she said.

WoMVA brings together female professionals at the firm for mentoring, networking and career development opportunities. The group is devoted to promoting the interests and progress of women lawyers and non-legal professionals, including through efforts to promote women to leadership positions in the firm and the community.



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She credits the firm for being flexible over the past year, but points to a common flaw she has noticed affecting all women lawyers. “We need to be better at creating boundaries between home and work. Work is always there,” Reedy said.

[Melissa Ebel](#), co-chair of the professional development initiative Women of Eastman & Smith (WES) at the law firm Eastman & Smith Ltd., said the pandemic was a huge adjustment for attorneys who found themselves providing legal services while caring for young children, facilitating remote education for school-aged children or both.

Ebel, a mother to three children under age 5, needed a leave of absence to care for them. “The firm was fantastic,” she said. “My partners assisted in serving our clients; once my children’s childcare re-opened, I was able to gradually, and relatively seamlessly, return to my practice.”

WES, whose members are also members of the firm’s management team, took an important step toward advancing awareness of gender equality and equity issues within the firm last year, when the firm adopted a 12-week paid parental leave policy for all employees, regardless of gender, who need time to care for the birth, adoption or foster placement of children.

In addition, WES has enhanced the firm’s mentoring program for women attorneys, helping women associates develop and establish relationships with more-senior attorneys.

“Our need for WES to transition to virtual programming due to COVID-19 resulted in increased attorney attendance and participation,” Ebel said. “Each month, different WES members team up and decide on the theme of the programming. The goal is to provide our women attorneys with opportunities to share ideas, foster internal relationships, expand contacts and build leadership skills.

[Lori Wisniewski Azzara](#), chair of the [Women’s Initiative](#) at the law firm Cohen Seglias Pallas Greenhall & Furman PC, said the firm has learned that attorneys can still be productive without being in the office. “As a result, the firm instituted a remote work policy for all attorneys, which provides attorneys with the option to work one day per week from home once our offices reopen,” she said. “This added flexibility is beneficial for our female attorneys, particularly those with younger children or those in caregiver roles, because it allows for balancing home and work demands on a more-convenient schedule.”

“Because many state and national events and conferences were being conducted virtually, we were able to broaden the number of female attorneys at our firm who could attend meetings,” said Azzara, noting another opportunity the pandemic offered for greater participation and engagement.

[Mollie Farrell](#), Greensfelder’s Director of Professional Development, works with Women’s Connect, the firm’s internal initiative that organizes social and professional development opportunities to connect women attorneys across all offices and practice areas. She explained how the firm’s partnership with a community provider helps to ease stress and worry for firm employees when having to manage eldercare.

“One important priority has been to support caregivers, whether that is parents or others who are caring for elderly or sick family members,” Farrell said. “In 2020, the firm began partnering with [Homethrive](#), a family elder care coordinator, to offer all of its employees a fully covered family caregiver service benefit as part of the firm’s broader benefits package. Through this new partnership, we have additional programming and support available to attorneys and staff.”

Farrell also pointed to the need for clear, consistent communication from firm management. “It has been important for employees at all levels to hear the message from top leadership that they are supported in their need for accommodation, whether that is related to their personal working situation, a need for family leave or other struggles,” she said.

Sanity and Service During the Pandemic

Women’s initiatives at law firms understood the need for socializing, albeit distanced, to maintain relationships and sanity during the pandemic.

While WoMVA’s biannual retreat had to be cancelled last fall, the group kept to a fairly normal level of activity, with programs such as a virtually guided wine and cheese pairing tasting, and an online holiday party.

One new effort that has been particularly well-received was the launch of the WoMVA book club. The women meet quarterly for meaningful discussion about a book’s relevance to their personal and professional lives, alternating between fiction and nonfiction reading choices, while catching up with one another. The book club cultivates cross-team relationships, which expands female attorneys’ professional and personal networks within the firm.

Women of Eastman & Smith (WES) did not slow down its service during the past year. Focusing on the importance of literacy, WES held an internal book drive in June 2020 to collect books to donate to a local nonprofit that assists low-income parents with how to prepare their children for kindergarten. WES collected more than 150 books from attorneys and staff to donate, tripling their initial goal.

At Cohen Seglias, Azzara said she hopes the Women’s Initiative will use 2021 to reconnect, both internally and with clients. “Our programming this year will focus on bringing us together and providing opportunities to engage with our clients, even if we are still operating in a virtual setting,” she said.

Maternity Leave

Pending motherhood brings unique challenges, and several firms provide formal support. WoMVA’s Advocate Program pairs expecting and new mothers with an internal advocate to help them at the firm with their transition to parental leave, and when returning to the firm. “This program has been especially helpful during the pandemic,” Reedy said.

Cohen Seglias recently implemented a ramp-down/ramp-up policy. “This provides new mothers with some breathing room and flexibility in their billable hour requirement as they

prepare for and adjust to motherhood," said Azzara. "The firm strives to support its female attorneys during this process, and this policy furthers that goal by providing an opportunity for the attorney to be successful, both personally and professionally."

Women's History Month

In recognition of International Women's Day and Women's History Month, these firms undertook different approaches to honor the women at their firms.

WoMVA invited all firm employees to a webinar, "How Men Can #ChooseToChallenge Gender Inequity in Law," with a panel of business leaders and change-makers who addressed the role of men in advancing gender equality in the workforce, especially in the business of law.

Another firm accepted the #ChooseToChallenge theme. Eastman & Smith's managing partner called on all attorneys and staff to work together to ensure the firm provides a culture where all are welcome, included and empowered to succeed, and provided a forum to discuss the firm's commitment to creating an inclusive work environment.

Cohen Seglias is posting a daily feature in March about each of the firm's female attorneys and leaders on its social media pages. With a significant presence in the construction industry, the firm also spotlights its female attorneys who practice in construction, since March also includes Women in Construction week.

The Women's Connect group at Greensfelder undertook a new project this year to reach out directly to all of the firm's women attorneys and have one-on-one phone conversations with as many as possible. The discussions served two purposes: to interview each attorney and learn a bit more about their personal and professional backgrounds, and to delve into how they feel about the firm and how Women's Connect can best support them.

"That information is now being used in multiple ways, including for mini-profiles of each interviewee to be shared internally throughout March and as the basis for external messaging for International Women's Day," said Farrell. "Most important, it is serving as background knowledge to inform the Women's Connect leaders and other firm leadership about ways they might consider enhancing their support for women. This has been a valuable and much-needed way to rebuild some of the personal connections that may have lost momentum during remote-work time and to remind people that their voices are important and heard."

Women's initiative groups at law firms are crucial to providing women lawyers of all ages with ways to feel empowered about their careers, professional relationships and work environments. As law firms have had to become more empathetic to the work-life balance and enable greater flexibility, women's programming must remain a priority for women lawyers to succeed on all fronts as a new "normal" emerges.

This article originally appeared online for The National Law Review on March 18, 2021.