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Companies pledge to spend more with diverse outside law firms

BY MARY DIDUCH
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* National initiative will benefit enterprises in North Jersey.

U.S. companies including McDonald's Corp., Aetna Inc. and Google Inc. — have pledged to spend \$139 million this year with minority- and women-owned law firms through a national initiative aimed at diversifying outside legal counsel retainers in corporate America that includes firms in North Jersey.

The Inclusion Initiative, run by the National Association of Minority- and Women-Owned Law Firms, helps corporate counsels to look at the whole pool of law firms for outside services, said Emery Harlan, NAMWOLF's board chairman and a partner at Milwaukee-based Gonzalez Saggio and Harlan LLP, a national minority-owned law firm.

"It sends a signal and serves as an impetus



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for other companies who are not part of this initiative to consider creating more opportunities for firms like ours to compete for legal work," said Harlan, who cited Microsoft Corp. as a firm client and one of the 25 initiative members.

Steve Gerber, a partner at the Wayne office of Gonzalez Saggio, said his office of six full-time attorneys has worked with large clients through the initiative and NAMWOLF.

"There's been a struggle for corporations to help identify highly qualified minority-owned, women-owned law firms," Gerber said.

In the northern New Jersey region, 4.55 percent of partners listed in the 2011-12 National Association for Law Placement Directory of Legal Employers are minority and 1.39 percent are minority women. Close to 15 percent of associates in the area are minority, and 8.27 percent are minority women, according to NALP's data.

Nationwide, 6.56 percent of partners are minority, while 2.04 percent are minority

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women.

Many major law firms and corporate law departments around the country are aware of this lack of diversity and are taking steps to address it, said Rick Meade, vice president and chief legal officer-international at Newark-based Prudential Financial Inc., which helped to spearhead the effort in 2010 with DuPont.

"Big corporate law departments like ours with a variety of needs can have many of those needs met with minority- and women-owned law firms," Meade said.

Prudential allocates between 5 percent and 10 percent of its total outside counsel budget for the United States toward diverse law firms.

Since the start of the program, Prudential has partnered with six New Jersey firms, primarily Cuyler Burk in Parsippany, Nukk-Freeman & Cerra in Short Hills and Wong Fleming in Princeton, Meade said.

"Through Prudential's increasing commitment through the Inclusion Initiative, they have been a great support to our firm," said Jo Ann Burk, senior managing partner of Cuyler Burk, which has six female attorneys and four male of counsel attorneys.



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The initiative has put more than \$140 million toward the mission since 2010, and the companies are on track to exceed their 2012 pledge as they have each year, said NAMWOLF board member Robin Wofford, a San Diego-based attorney. The initiative members report their actual spending to NAMWOLF, which does not disclose individual numbers.

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