

# CRAIN'S CLEVELAND BUSINESS

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## Minority, Cleveland bar associations band together to address diversity

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Contributed photo

Leaders of the Cleveland Metropolitan Bar Association and local minority bars sign a memorandum of understanding formalizing a working partnership together. Pictured are: Patrick Espinoza, Ohio Hispanic Bar Association president; Ruchi Asher, South Asian American Bar Association of Ohio president; Valissa Turner Howard, Norman S. Minor Bar Association president; Aanchal Sharma, Asian American Bar Association of Ohio secretary; Rebecca Ruppert McMahon, CMBA CEO; Marlon Primes CMBA president.

A new partnership between the Cleveland Metropolitan Bar Association and some minority bars is designed to help address an ongoing issue in the business of law.

Whether in Northeast Ohio or across the industry, it's hardly a secret that diverse representation in the business of law continues to be abysmal.

However, a new partnership between the [Cleveland Metropolitan Bar Association](#) and some minority bars is designed to help address that ongoing issue. Stakeholders hope that working

together will not only beef up their ranks with practicing attorneys from diverse backgrounds, but encourage others to live and work in this market – and maybe even encourage other minorities to pursue a career in law.

Earlier this month, the CMBA and four local minority bars signed a memorandum of understanding that formalizes several initiatives that have been under discussion for some time. The signatories are the [Asian American Bar Association of Ohio](#), [Norman S. Minor Bar Association](#), [Ohio Hispanic Bar Association](#) and [South Asian American Bar Association of Ohio](#).

As part of the partnership, the CMBA will open its space to those organizations during regular business hours. That alone provides each minority bar with storage space, access to the CMBA's records and, most importantly, a proper mailing address (the minority bars don't have physical locations and rely on P.O. boxes). The groups will also share access to one another's membership bases to cross-promote events. The whole initiative was largely spearheaded by assistant U.S. attorney Marlon Primes, the [first African-American president of the CMBA](#).

Membership at the CMBA has trended down in recent years. It was nearly 6,000 people in 2015, but stands at roughly 5,200 today. Numbers are expectedly much smaller at the minority bars, often a few dozen at most.

The Norman S. Minor Bar, while not the first African-American legal organization in Cleveland, is the first true African-American bar association in the market. Its ranks have hovered between 60 to 80 members in recent years. Groups like it formed specifically to support and address the needs of lawyers from minority backgrounds.

Current president Valissa Turner Howard, first assistant deputy inspector general and chief diversity officer at Cuyahoga County's Agency of Inspector General, said growing membership, expanding the budget and ultimately improving the diversity pipeline are among the group's top objectives.

"There are still very few lawyers or law students of color who participate in majority bars due to lack of resources (price of membership/paying for more than one bar membership), lack of time (they only have time to devote to one legal organization) and more frequently a lack of comfort/feeling of isolation (they do not want to be the only or one of a handful in the room at every event)," Turner said.

But while that overall mission isn't materially different from why the organization was created in 1980, Turner indicated that such seemingly straightforward goals become more challenging for a minority bar with few resources, no paid staff and no home base.

She also lamented how past presidents kept documents and other pieces of history at their homes or personal offices, leading to some of those materials being lost over the years.

"As a small organization with limited funding, the newly minted partnership with CMBA is just what we needed to fortify our infrastructure for the long term," Turner said. "With the signing of this MOU, we now have a space where over 35 years of our history can be deposited for future leaders and members of NSMBA, and we have the limited assistance of CMBA staff for some administrative tasks."

The Asian American Bar Association of Ohio has struggled to keep up its ranks, having a couple years of dormancy since it was established in 1992. Yet, it serves a unique purpose in the market in terms of not just supporting Asian lawyers but also courting them to live and work in the market.

"We routinely interface with out-of-state candidates thinking about moving to Northeast Ohio, and our presence can help a candidate know they can adapt to our community and succeed here," said president Neil Bhagat, in-house counsel with Progressive Insurance. "We think increasing diversity in the bar ensures that the general public here has a legal community which reflects its demographics."

"We do expect the MOU to help us increase our membership and, at the very least, increase our brand awareness to the local legal community," he added. "That in turn should help us focus on our broader efforts to improve diversity in this market."

Which is really the broader goal.

According to [Crain's analysis](#), law firms in Northeast Ohio reported that just 4% of local firm partners were nonwhite in 2018, a figure that actually dipped slightly from 10 years prior. A survey of demographics by the CMBA a couple years prior – one that only a disappointingly low 20% of firms surveyed actually responded to (the largest, corporate law firms were most likely to reply) – had comparable findings.

**Just 15%** of the 1.3 million attorneys active in 2018 identified as minorities, according to the [American Bar Association](#).

As the industry grapples with not just bringing more diverse people into its ranks but also promoting them up the corporate ladder to partners and positions of leadership, companies increasingly are interested in diverse attorneys as part of their own social justice missions as well.

Primes recalled a past CMBA diversity series event featuring an attorney from Abercrombie & Fitch Co., the struggling Ohio-based clothing company that was lambasted when its former CEO, Michael Jeffries, said in a [news story](#): "A lot of people don't belong (in our clothes), and they can't belong. Are we exclusionary? Absolutely."

According to Primes, that lawyer reported the company, which has been trying to restore its image since Jeffries' infamous 2013 remarks, has been ditching law firms without diverse benches and taking its legal work to more broadly representative firms.

"It's not just Abercrombie & Fitch doing this, but a cross-section of corporations, especially those with a diverse client base," Primes said. "So it helps for law firms to become diverse to attract business from a wide variety of sources."

"And as we move more toward a minority country," he added, "those pressures will be more acute as time goes on."

Inline Play

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