

US Firms Seeing Fewer Women as Associates

By Andy Meek

There aren't as many women associates working at U.S. law firms as there have been in the recent past.

That's according to the latest numbers from the National Association for Law Placement, which show women accounted for 45.05 percent of all associates in 2012, down from 45.35 percent the year before.

It's the third time since the [NALP](#) began tracking the numbers in 1993 that the percentage of women associates has declined.

The information came from 1,209 law offices nationwide that are members of the group's directory of legal employers.

That trend is manifesting itself in different ways, depending on where a person looks, and is reflected in different ways locally. One female attorney in Memphis told The Daily News that the [NALP](#) data suggest summer internship numbers relative to women as well as partnerships for women are on the rise, but that fewer women are entering the law firm workforce as associate attorneys.

What's more, she said she's seeing a drop-off in resumes coming into her office from women.

The picture is complemented by other national trends. A recent survey of the 200 largest law firms in the U.S. showed that women don't have a widespread presence in the top ranks. That's according to the Seventh Annual National Association of Women Lawyers Survey on Retention and Promotion of Women in Law Firms.

"If this trend continues," the NAWL Foundation said in a press release, "it could trigger a downward spiral for women in the profession – we could see fewer women senior partners and law-firm leaders in the future, and thus fewer role models and mentors for succeeding cohorts of women lawyers."

"There have been some dips in the rest of the country," said Donna Fraiche, a shareholder in New Orleans with Memphis-based Baker, Donelson, Bearman, Caldwell & Berkowitz PC.

She also chairs the firm's Women's Initiative.

Bucking the national trend, Fraiche said the percentage of women associates at Baker Donelson is up by a percentage point from last year.

"Increasing the number of women in leadership in our firm and heeding the call of our clients for more diversified teams is something we take very seriously," she said. "Of course, not every woman has to make their way up the leadership ranks to be successful in the profession. Women may want to do other things. And it's not so much at the associate level. It's as you get to the senior associate level, it may coincide with childbearing years.

"What Baker Donelson did early on was to have a program that allows for women to make a contribution to the profession and the firm by being staff attorneys or being of counsel and still making serious contributions to themselves and their professions – and not being penalized for that."

Butler, Snow, O'[Mara, Stevens & Cannada PLLC](#) has a similarly targeted diversity initiative that promotes outreach through professional associations, mentoring, sponsorships and networking.

[Jackson Lewis LLP](#), one of the country's largest workplace law firms and which opened a Memphis office a few years ago, recently achieved a prominent national recognition for its own diversity efforts.

Jackson Lewis ranked 36th on MultiCultural Law magazine's 2012 "Top 100 Law Firms for Diversity" listing, which stacks up the top firms in the nation on the basis of diversity and inclusion.

The firm also garnered a top ranking as a top law firm for women.

Baker Donelson has seen a bump up in the number of "of counsel" women attorneys in the last couple of years and in the number of women shareholders, Fraiche said.

"Where the rest of the country is stagnant and losing ground, we think we're moving forward in a very positive direction," she said. "There are admirable reasons why women and men leave law practice for other kinds of law practice, or they might want to leave the profession for a while and try their hand at some other things. We're better because we are diverse, and many of our clients demand we have diversity to service their business and so do we."