

## Nebraska's Legal Diversity Summit

Over 175 participants including Nebraska's legal employers and law students of color from Nebraska, Iowa, Kansas, Missouri and South Dakota gathered together on April 11, 2005 for Nebraska's first Legal Diversity Summit. The Summit, at the Embassy Suites in downtown Omaha, was organized in response to the Minority and Justice Task Force's (2003) examination of Nebraska's legal profession which examined trends in the current recruitment, hiring, retention, and advancement opportunities available to racial and ethnic minorities in Nebraska, as perceived by those working in the legal profession.

Results from the investigation show that minorities are drastically underrepresented in Nebraska's legal profession; of the state's 4,800 attorneys only 115 identify as racial or ethnic minorities. Results also indicate that minority Bar members are more likely to believe that there are fewer opportunities in private firms for minority law school graduates and that little effort is made to recruit and retain those minority Bar members who are hired. Moreover, minority Bar members are more likely to believe that they have fewer opportunities for mentoring and networking and are less likely to be satisfied with their opportunities for professional advancement. Given these perceptions it is not surprising that few minority attorneys stay in Nebraska to practice. As one minority attorney succinctly explains the situation:

It is true that minorities leave the state because there are no opportunities and no one is making an effort to give opportunities.

—An anonymous Nebraska attorney

In an effort to change these perceptions, the Minority and Justice Implementation Committee joined forces with the state's major legal institutions in a concerted effort to promote diversity in Nebraska's legal profession. As co-chair of the Minority and Justice Implementation Committee, Justice John Gerrard explains, "While the state is already taking significant steps towards increasing the number of minority students interested in pursuing a career in the law, we recognize that efforts to increase the pipeline of minority attorneys will only achieve limited success in diversifying Nebraska's legal community if employment opportunities are not available to minority law students upon graduation." The Summit was designed not only to create awareness among the profession about the value of diversity, but to educate legal employers on how to increase their efforts to recruit and retain attorneys of color, and to provide law

students from the region with the opportunity to learn more about employment opportunities in Nebraska.

The Summit featured two nationally prominent speakers. Dennis Archer, the first African American President of the American Bar Association, former Michigan Supreme Court Justice, former mayor of Detroit, and one of the "United States' Most Powerful Attorneys" as named by the *National Law Journal*, and Muzette Hill a native of Omaha, who has spoken about retention issues on numerous occasions for the American Bar Association. As Managing Counsel for Ford Motor Credit Company in Michigan, Hill emphasized the role that corporations have had in promoting diversity. Because more corporations want law firms to reflect that same diversity that the corporations have developed, they encourage law firms to also become more diverse.

In addition to addressing why a state like Nebraska should be concerned with diversity, the importance of mentoring, and the steps which Bar Associations, the court and our law schools can take to promote diversity, the speakers encouraged law firms to think outside the box when it comes to recruiting. Research by the Minority Corporate Counsel Association shows that the traditional indicators of performance (law school grades, law review credentials, Order of the Coif, etc.) are not good predictors of success in large law firms. In fact, a substantial percentage of the most successful lawyers, did not possess many of these "traditional indicators"—they did not graduate in the upper half of the class, and were not on *Law Review*, but they possessed the motivation and other skills that made them successful. Many firms currently limit their interviews to students graduating in the top 10% of their class. The speakers encouraged firms to examine and expand their interviewing and hiring criteria to consider alternate skills and experiences that law students may possess.

Law students in attendance were optimistic about the dialogue that took place at the Summit, and are hopeful that the legal community will take action. As University of South Dakota student, Kwaku Agyeman explained, "They have made a huge stride. The candor that characterized this diversity initiative and discussions in the legal profession was very encouraging. It remains to be seen how the legal community will back the rhetoric with action."

The Summit was funded by the Kutak Foundation, the National Bar Institute, the Nebraska State Bar Association and the Minority and Justice Implementation Committee. 