

A Healthy Approach To Building A Staff

For Yale-New Haven, diversity is an educational tool

By ANNE DORFMAN

Bill Aseltyne, Yale-New Haven Health System's general counsel, says *he* was the legal department's first diversity hire. Since then, the department has added three attorneys and two staff members of minority background.

Aseltyne, who is openly gay, says he's committed to a diverse and inclusive workplace, not just because he wholeheartedly believes that a law department should reflect the wider society, but also because diversity leads to better lawyering — and makes for a more congenial and enjoyable — workplace.

"You get a better work product" in a diverse environment, "especially for lawyers," he says. "I think it makes us better lawyers."

Roughly three quarters of Yale-New Haven's 11 lawyers are women, as is three quarters of the law department's leadership team. It's not uncommon to find a high proportion of female attorneys doing health-related work, Aseltyne explains, because many have joined the legal profession after careers in nursing or other health care jobs.

As members of the health law bar, Aseltyne's team at Yale-New Haven Health's Legal & Risk Services Department is perhaps especially aware of the importance of celebrating diversity in everyday life, because Yale-New Haven Health's clients, vendors and employees come from all ethnic and social backgrounds. (The company, Connecticut's largest health care provider, runs hospitals in New Haven, Bridgeport and Greenwich, and is the second-largest employer in New Haven after Yale University.)

Assistant General Counsel Lisa Fay, who is also the company's director of administrative services, says diversity goes hand in hand with cultural awareness,



Carmen Natale

The legal department of Yale-New Haven Health System. Front row (left to right): Megan Gaffney, Jacqueline Anthony, Pamela Marfino, Anjuli Kelotra, William Aseltyne, Irene Noel, Christopher Vita, Rose Valentino, and Teresa Clark. Back row (left to right): Kimberly Nohilly, Donna Jersey, Stuart Warner, Marc Lombardi, John Ashmeade, Karen McPherson, Lisa Fay, Deborah Hodys, Jennifer Willcox, and Jose Crespo.

and cultural awareness is key to delivering legal services in a health care context. "We learn from each other," she says.

"We can't ignore the cultures that patients bring to us, and the legal department must stay attuned to the needs of patients and employees if it is to serve them well," Aseltyne says. "Whether it's a patient issue or an employment issue, it may be that we're not appreciating a cultural difference." Aseltyne notes that in our western health care system, it's individuals who are the decision makers. In other cultures, though, many health-related decisions are made by the family. The ability to learn from clients is essential if they

are to be well served — and service is important to Aseltyne and his legal team.

In fact, he renamed the law department when he took over as general counsel, making sure the word "services" appeared prominently to underline the importance he attaches to lawyers' helping role.

In addition to enhancing the legal team's ability to support clients and employees, diversity and cultural understanding play a major role in the law department's daily operations. Yale-New Haven's lawyers work in what they term a "high-octane" atmosphere; recent efforts at health care reform have only intensified the pressures. Unless everyone feels able

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to voice differing opinions, team members will not feel confident, Aseltyne says, adding, "I strive to create that environment."

'Life Happens'

Hard work is the name of the game at Yale-New Haven Health, but to Aseltyne this means it makes sense to be sensible about flexible scheduling. He and several of his team members have young children, and the reality is that parents sometimes have to work from home, says Assistant General Counsel Fay. New Haven schools had eight snow days in January, for example, and this posed a real challenge for parents.

Aseltyne thinks lawyers who are able to juggle work and home life relatively easily, and to spend quality time with their kids, tend to be more productive than their colleagues in offices where the work-life balance is less healthy. "It's not to say that we work any less hard than [other lawyers], but we acknowledge that life happens," he says.

For Yale-New Haven's lawyers, the push for diversity doesn't stop at the office. Many private firms with health law practices do not have as diverse a team as Aseltyne would like to see. To help remedy the situation, he said his team has contacted outside law firms and told them "we value diversity and we want you to consider that in staffing our cases."

One firm, Wiggin and Dana, agreed to help bring change. Together they created the Yale-New Haven Health System/Wig-

gin and Dana Diversity Scholars Program. The goal is to foster diversity within the health law bar and to help Yale-New Haven better serve its hospitals.

Danielle McGee, their first diversity scholar, begins work at Wiggin and Dana's New Haven office at the end of this month.

Aseltyne says the program had "phenomenal" candidates from as far away as Wisconsin and West Virginia. Eventually they chose McGee, a young African-American woman who will have completed her first year at Quinnipiac University School of Law after majoring in political science at Fairfield University, with an undergraduate minor in peace and justice studies. Aseltyne says Danielle is "dynamic"—

just the type of person he and his colleagues were looking for, and just the type of person they hope will eventually join the health law bar.

After spending four weeks at Wiggin and Dana, Mc-

Gee will devote a second month to substantive legal work at Yale-New Haven Health. Aseltyne's team plans to give her challenging projects that will provide broad experience in health care law, rotating among regulatory and compliance work, employment law and litigation.

Aseltyne says efforts to promote diversity in the legal profession have not always worked; it's one thing to recruit a diverse group of attorneys, and another to retain members of minority groups who sometimes don't feel truly welcome. He believes

an employer that understands the connection between the issues of diversity and quality of life in the workplace has a better chance of retaining a diverse workforce.

Aseltyne is especially proud to report that Anjali Kelotra, a lawyer of South Asian background who joined Yale-New Haven's law department last year, has been particularly vocal in expressing how supportive she finds the work environment.

Aseltyne says there is no litmus test, political or otherwise, for belonging in his department, where a variety of political opinions are shared in a friendly spirit. This makes for lively lunchtime conversation, he says – with discussions ranging from funding for NPR to what Fox News covered the night before. "You don't necessarily have to be best friends with the people you work with, but you do have to have trust," he says.

Not only are the lawyers in the Legal & Risk Services Department a diverse group, but three of the seven support staff are also from minority backgrounds. Administrative assistant José Crespo, for example, whose family is from Puerto Rico, started as a New Haven "Youth at Work" student in 2007. Crespo has since graduated from high school and joined the Yale-New Haven Health team in an administrative position when he started college.

During a stint in the law department, in summer 2007, he demonstrated maturity beyond his years ... and was hired. Crespo's stated career goal? To be mayor of New Haven – and Aseltyne and Fay say they have no doubt he'll make it. If he does, he will likely cite the confidence shown in him by his employers at Yale-New Haven Health System as a factor in his success. ■

Diversity goes hand in hand with cultural awareness, and cultural awareness is key to delivering legal services in a health care context.