

More Women of Color Take On Big Law Leadership Roles

Covington & Burling, Squire Patton Boggs and Perkins Coie appointed new leaders recently.

By Patrick Smith
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Covington & Burling's newest management committee members join a small, but growing list of women of color who have ascended into Big Law leadership roles, including recent additions at Squire Patton Boggs and Perkins Coie.

Representation of diverse lawyers in firm leadership has been highlighted by experts as a key element to improving diversity and equity in the profession as a whole.

Covington announced Wednesday that Phyllis Jones in Washington, D.C., a litigator and partner at the firm since 2013, and Lisa Peets in London, who leads the firm's technology regulatory policy practice and has been a partner since 2005, have been elected to the management committee.

They replace Catherine Dargan and Louise Nash on the firm's eight-member management committee, maintaining the committee's gender diversity with three female members out of eight.

It should be noted that both Jones and Peets are women of color, and so is Dargan. Big Law on the whole has struggled to improve when it comes to equal representation of diverse lawyers in partnership and leadership ranks. According to a [recent report](#) from the National Association for Law Placement, women of color comprise less than 4% of all partners in firms, with Black women and Latinx women accounting for less than 1% each of all partners.



Courtesy photos

Phyllis Jones, left, and Lisa Peets, right, with Covington.

"Phyllis and Lisa embody the Covington ethos," Doug Gibson, Covington's chair, said in a statement. "They are extraordinarily strong partners and skilled lawyers, who have the judgment and interpersonal skills that our partners want to see in the management committee, and they will bring fresh perspectives and new ideas to the management of our firm."

Gibson also noted, "The gender and ethnic diversity of the committee is also critical because we see diversity and inclusion as an essential element of our culture and community."

Peets and Jones both noted that they didn't fit the "mold" of how Big Law looked even 20 years ago. And they pointed to some helpful supports in their ascension—the presence of mentors and clients who valued diversity early on.

Peets said “those clients who have been committed since the early days, before diversity was as much of a focus as it is today” have been “important to my longevity and success.”

Jones agreed, saying that in addition to having a support network, it was important for her to be able to get work that challenged her up as she progressed.

“I would say if you think about all the different components that go into an associate being able to succeed at a firm, I had all those things,” she said. “Mentors, sponsors and a lot of stretch assignments out of my comfort zone.”

As the former management committee members pass on their firmwide leadership duties, Dargan will now serve as chair of the firm’s corporate practice and Nash will lead the firm’s EMEA strategy, Covington said in a statement.

While the gender and racial diversity of Covington’s management committee is worth noting, that wasn’t a factor in deciding who would replace Dargan and Nash, chair of the firm’s management committee Doug Gibson said.

“Most importantly for us, we want to have people on the committee who are widely respected across the firm, who are strong lawyers and strategic thinkers, but also have the right personality type and skills to be on the committee,” Gibson said in an interview. “It is a working body, and we are a very collegial shop the way we are set up. Both Phyllis and Lisa are terrific lawyers, very strategic and work well with other people across the firm.”

Other Firms’ New and Rising Leaders

In addition to Covington, Perkins Coie and Squire both appointed women of color into leadership roles in recent weeks. Am Law 200 firm Miller Canfield has also made a newsworthy step in gender diversity, selecting its first woman CEO.

Squire appointed Washington, D.C.-based partner Alethia Nancoo to its global board Jan. 12. Nancoo, who focuses her legal practice on public and project

financings, has been at Squire for seven years. Prior to that, she had a brief stint at Edwards Wildman Palmer. The bulk of her legal career was spent at Hogan Lovells, where she made partner in 2006.

Jill Louis took over the managing partner position in **Perkins Coie’s Dallas office** Feb. 10. Louis is a partner in Perkins Coie’s corporate and securities practice and will succeed Dean Harvey in the role of office managing partner.

Louis is a recent addition to Perkins Coie. She joined the firm in May of last year after about four years at K&L Gates. Previously, she served in senior legal positions at FleetPride, FedEx Office HQ Global Workspaces.

While not a woman of color, Megan Norris is set to take on firmwide leadership at Miller Canfield in less than two weeks. She said her experience in promoting diversity will be a major asset in her new role. Norris, who has been with Miller Canfield for 35 years and has held various leadership positions there for the past 20 years, said it isn’t lost on her that she is the first woman CEO in the firm’s 169 year history, but her resume speaks for itself, regardless of gender.

“I think one of the reasons I got the job is that I was a group leader for a really good group for a long time,” Norris said in an interview. “My group has done a really good job at hiring, training and promoting all those things that people are now looking for in diversity and inclusion efforts.”

Norris added, “Historically, the CEO at Miller Canfield has been a businessperson, and I am certainly not, but the skill set that is important right now is one that recognizes where D&I efforts fit in, but in a much more holistic approach to our people at the firm in general.”

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