

Sylvia James Tells Law360 Why Support from C-Suite Executives Bolsters Law Firm's Diversity and Inclusion Efforts

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Law firms and in-house operations have been adding diversity and inclusion professionals to their C-suites to oversee diversity efforts, picking up the steam to keep up with the promises they made in response to the nation's growing racial justice movement.

In October, Winston & Strawn announced the promotion of its director of diversity and inclusion, Sylvia James, to chief diversity and inclusion officer.

Sylvia told Law360 she's been focused on law firm diversity, working exclusively full time as a D&I professional in law firms for the last 14 years. She will report to Winston & Strawn's chief operating officer, Scot Farrell, and will also work closely with the firm's diversity and inclusion chair, Partner Kobi Brinson.

According to James, firms have been increasingly creating chief diversity officer positions, either by elevating their diversity and inclusion directors or bringing in professionals from the outside.

The C-suite title will give more diversity-focused professionals "a seat at the table" and allow them to have direct input as decisions are being made, James said.

"What we haven't made progress [on] — and it's been most disappointing, and frustrating, and I think the focus on racial equity right now shined a light on that — is with respect to Black lawyers," James said.

While firms have generally boosted their overall diversity, the industry still significantly lags when it comes to Black attorneys. "We need to disaggregate the group instead of just talking about percentages of minority lawyers in general because it hides the fact that we have one group that is not progressing as quickly as other groups," she said.

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