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TRACY BARAN, front, a partner at Partridge Snow & Hahn, is leading a women's advocacy initiative. With her, from left, are Lalitha Rao, Alicia J. Byrd, Deborah Dinardo, Kathleen Ryan, Catherine Eastwood, Elizabeth Lewis and Jennifer Cervenka.

Making women a priority

Firms develop programs to support female attorneys and clients alike

BY NATALIE MYERS
 MYERS@PBN.COM

Partridge Snow & Hahn LLP recently decided it was time to place greater focus on women's advancement, both within the firm and within the marketplace through special training sessions and networking events.

"We want this to be a forum to learn marketing skills and management skills," said Tracy Baran, a partner and leader in the firm's Women Advocates for Enterprise initiative. "We want to create leadership opportunities."

The law firm has been developing programming for the initiative for several months, she said. Next on the agenda is a training session on best networking practices later this month, organized in partnership with Leading Women of Southeastern New England.

Baran said several of the firm's female attorneys are involved in promoting women by volunteering at venues such as the Center for Women & Enterprise in Providence.

The firm has held an annual women's luncheon for the past five years, she said. It aims to provide a networking opportunity for the lawyers, their clients and other invited guests.

"We wanted to build on that," Baran said, adding that

the firm also hopes the initiative will attract new female clients.

Partners at the firm decided to start WAVE at a retreat last year because of the increasing number of woman-owned and woman-operated businesses they see in the marketplace.

"We definitely would like to reach out to more women in business," Baran said.

The other half of the initiative is its internal component.

During the past 10 years the number of female attorneys at Partridge Snow & Hahn has doubled, Baran said. Women make up about 30 percent of the attorneys at the firm.

"The firm felt it needed to start this initiative ... to ensure their success at the firm," she said.

The internal initiative will incorporate monthly meetings for female attorneys and internal training opportunities. It will provide a forum to discuss issues they might be having and create a venue to meet mentors.

Edwards Angell Palmer & Dodge LLP also has a women's initiative, started in 1996 in response to feedback from female clients who wanted a meeting place to connect with other female professionals, said Susan Keller, senior partner and founder of the initiative.

In the beginning, the firm surveyed its female attor-

neys and clients to determine what kind of programming they wanted, she said. The women responded that they wanted a varied mix of educational, social and charitable events.

As a result, the firm's women's initiative hosts educational speakers and seminar events that incorporate networking and charitable components. Each of the firm's offices offers about four events per year, Keller said.

The internal component consists of an annual retreat for the firm's female attorneys, but also encourages them to meet regularly between offices to share ideas and experiences.

Baran said Partridge Snow & Hahn wants to do something similar by getting programming ideas from women working within the firm.

"We want to make it a tailored program so we are addressing the needs of women and our clients," she said.

Asked whether she thinks women's initiatives could become a popular trend for law firms, Keller said a women's initiative would not work in all law firms because there are not a lot of women in high-level positions.

"You have to have a buy-in from the top down," she said, adding that law firms also need a critical mass of female attorneys and clients to make an initiative effective. "It depends on what your makeup is." ■