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Women Ascend to Leadership Ranks at the Biggest Metro Bar Associations in Texas

All five of the Lone Star State's biggest metropolitan area bar associations are currently run by women executive directors.

By **Angela Morris** | February 27, 2019

Although the female attorneys of Texas, just like their nationwide peers, are still limited in their ascent to the upper echelon in law firms and corporations, their counterparts within local bar associations are finding better leadership opportunities.

All five of the Lone Star State's biggest metropolitan area bar associations are currently run by women executive directors. Two of them, Kay Sim of Houston and Delaine Ward of Austin, have been at their posts for 30-plus years, while the remaining three—Alicia Hernandez of Dallas, Megan Cooley of Tarrant County and June Moynihan of San Antonio—all took over after longtime leaders retired within the past few years.

"It's wonderful we have them, because they deserved it. They are all qualified, but more than anything, they all have that spirit of caring about the community and its needs and searching with their boards on ways they can, as a profession, help those communities

be better,” said Sim, executive director of the Houston Bar Association, the longest-serving of the bunch.

As the nation celebrates Women’s History Month, it’s a good time to reflect on how female attorneys have risen to the top of local bar associations, even while they continue to struggle to bust the glass ceiling in other areas of the legal profession.

Sim explained that because bar associations are tasked with representing the whole cross-section of the legal community—along gender, race and other diversity metrics—they’re very sensitive to ensuring that diverse candidates have an equal shot at leadership.

“We strive to have that diversity. It’s a conscious effort,” Sim said.

In the wider legal profession, more than half of law school graduates are women, nearly half of new associates in law firms are women, yet only 18 percent of equity partners are female, according to the American Bar Association. In top corporations, only 26 percent of general counsel are women. Many female attorneys tend to drop out when they have children, because the schedule doesn’t mesh well with raising small humans.

There may be a perception that schedules are better in bar associations, because they’re nonprofits, but it’s not necessarily the case, said Moynihan, executive director of the San Antonio Bar Association. She said her staff of nine people—all of them are women—work very hard, although she does grant flexibility when anyone needs off work to take a child to the doctor or other things. No one holds it against them.

“I think the difference is maybe, because there are more women in leadership, we have sensitivity to it,” she said, adding that staffers tend to make up the hours by working nights. “To work at a nonprofit, you really have to be mission-driven. I have a nice team, and they all believe in our mission. I feel my job is almost making sure they don’t burn out.”

Texas is not unique in having women running its local bar associations. The phenomenon actually follows a nationwide trend [documented by the American Bar Association](#)

(https://www.americanbar.org/groups/bar_services/publications/bar_leader/2007_08/32

For example, in 2017, women executive directors headed 12 of the 20 largest metro bars, and seven of the 20 largest state bars. State bars in Arkansas, Virginia and West Virginia are run by women, in New England, 4 out of 6 state bar executives are female and in the Western States Bar Conference, 8 out of 16 state bar executives are women.

The State Bar of Texas was run by a female executive director, Michelle Hunter, for 10 years before her [retirement last year](https://www.texasbar.com/AM/Template.cfm?Section=Press_Releases&Template=/CM/HTMLDisplay.cfm&ContentID=35836) (https://www.texasbar.com/AM/Template.cfm?Section=Press_Releases&Template=/CM/HTMLDisplay.cfm&ContentID=35836).

Karen Hutchins, president of the National Association of Bar Executives, has seen the transformation of bar executive directors first hand. In 2007, when she entered the industry as executive director of the Arkansas Bar Association, it was more rare to see women in the top post. But today, the gender ratio of NABE membership seems to be close to 50-50 male to female. Hutchins said she's pleased and happy to see the trend, because she's found that female bar executive directors are creative, organized and able to juggle multiple tasks. Like all diverse employees, they're able to bring a new perspective that improves bar decision-making.

"I think over the years people have come to realize that I think for whatever reasons that women have not had the opportunities in the past in the legal profession," Hutchins said. "It's been a process of awakening."

Meet the Female Bar Executive Directors

Kay Sim has been the longest-serving among the five female executive directors of the Lone Star State's five major metro bar associations. She recently announced her [plans to retire on March 1](https://www.hba.org/news/executive-director/) (<https://www.hba.org/news/executive-director/>) after working at

the Houston Bar Association for 44 years—38 of them as executive director. In her tenure, membership grew from 5,900 members to 11,000 and its budget went from \$540,000 to \$2.5 million.

This year, DeLaine Ward, executive director of the Austin Bar Association, celebrated 35 years leading the association, which serves a metropolitan statistical area with 12,300 lawyers, according to State Bar of Texas data. Ward began her career in 1982 as an administrative assistant in the State Bar of Texas's Division of Bar Services before moving to the Austin Bar Association in 1984.

Alicia Hernandez, the executive director of the Dallas Bar Association, had worked there for 16 years before assuming the helm in January 2017—which puts her in charge of 24 staffers and a \$4.3 million budget. Immediately before that, she was director of the Dallas Volunteer Attorney Program and director of the Lawyer Referral Service.

June Moynihan began leading the San Antonio bar in May 2017. For two years previous, she was membership director and San Antonio Bar Foundation director. She's originally from San Francisco and earned her law degree from the University of California, Hastings College of the Law in 1994.

Megan Cooley, executive director of the Tarrant County Bar Association, started as the organization's top leader in July 2017. Previously, she served as the association's pro bono programs director since 2014. But for most of Cooley's legal career, she was a litigator at Kelly Hart & Hallman in Fort Worth for 14 years.

Angela Morris is a freelance journalist. Follow her on Twitter at @AMorrisReports.

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