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Q&A: NYC Bar president on initiative to reach diverse lawyers-to-be in childhood

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(Reuters) - The New York City Bar Association is launching a far-reaching initiative to diversify the legal profession by creating a talent pipeline that begins as early as elementary school, after finding in a recent report that minorities remain underrepresented at law firms.

Roger Juan Maldonado, the group's president, said in a recent interview with Reuters that years-long diversity efforts by firms, bar associations and the court system have been disjointed and produced mixed results. The city bar initiative, announced last month, is designed to unite those programs to create a continuous pipeline from early childhood through the first years of a lawyer's career, he said.

Maldonado is a partner at Smith Gambrell & Russell, where he practices commercial litigation.

Questions and answers have been edited for clarity and brevity.

REUTERS: How is this new initiative different from existing diversity efforts?

MALDONADO: The problem is that there is no easy way for (students) to know what programs are out there and how to connect the dots as they progress from elementary school to middle school to high school to college. So our first phase is to identify existing programs that work and figure out how we can bring all of those people together to create a continuous approach rather than a haphazard one.

REUTERS: How did the initiative and the new report come to be?

MALDONADO: A report (the city bar released) in 2016 revealed that there had been a regression in law firm diversity, especially with attorneys of color becoming partners. So the drafters of (last month's) report looked into what the problems are that make it hard for law firms to attract attorneys from diverse backgrounds. And the issue is, there are just not enough(of them). At the same time the report was being drafted, there was a conscious decision that we needed to focus not just on law firms but other stakeholders including the courts and schools.

REUTERS: How do you keep kids interested in the law over the long term, especially if they come from disadvantaged backgrounds and may face more obstacles?

MALDONADO: Well, step one is getting them interested in the first place. We need people going into the schools or inviting kids to our programs with whom the students can identify. If we're going into el barrio, I and other Spanish-speaking attorneys would be ideal to go and speak to the students. Some of them have a negative perception of the legal system, maybe it put their parent in jail, but we're saying, 'no, these institutions need to be supported, and you're going to increase the likelihood of improving the system for your community.'

REUTERS: How has your experience as a Hispanic lawyer informed your views on this?

MALDONADO: I had lots of opportunities and can't say I struggled in terms of becoming a lawyer or practicing law. But in my first years as a lawyer (in the early 1980s), I did see that women lawyers, particularly those of color, had a harder time. The culture of the older, all-male judges at the time was very biased against women. So that showed me early on in my career that the profession needed to do more about diversity.

REUTERS: There has been a lot of talk about the implicit, unconscious bias that even well-meaning employers can exhibit. Should law firms that already have diversity initiatives in place be considering how their policies address that?

MALDONADO: The report calls for exactly that sort of self analysis, and we plan to engage colleagues and law firms in that conversation. It can't just take place now and then we declare success and move on. There must be a continuous awareness of the fact of implicit bias and a long-term effort to engage in collaboration with all of the stakeholders.

---- **Index References** ----

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