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## Group forges links between firms' women

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More than 30 Chicago law firms have signed on as members of a first-of-its-kind project aimed at addressing issues faced by women lawyers.

The Coalition of Women's Initiatives in Law Firms stemmed from a March 2007 meeting attended by about 70 women. Out of the gathering came a steering committee charged with developing the organization's mission and outlining initial steps to be taken.

A total of 18 members of the group's Board of Directors were elected at a meeting last week. Among the board members are Nicole Nehama Auerbach, a principal of Valorem Law Group LLC, E. Lynn Grayson, a Jenner & Block LLC partner, and Marie A. Lona, a Winston & Strawn LLP partner.

"I think that there are a lot of separate initiatives addressing the same issues," Auerbach said in a telephone interview on Friday. "But this is a forum that allows us to harness the collective wisdom and experience of all of those women for the benefit of all of the member firms."

Auerbach and Tara Goff Kamradt began Katten, Muchin, Rosenman LLP's women's initiative in 2004.

"The idea came to me to see if there was any interest in getting all the women who were running their initiatives to address issues facing women lawyers," said Auerbach, now a Katten, Muchin alum. "We're overwhelmed with the response so far and the fact that there are 31 Chicago law firms interested in working together."

Most of the law firms that have joined the program have existing internal women's initiatives, according to Auerbach. Among the firms that have signed on are Baker & McKenzie LLP; Meckler, Bulger & Tilson LLP, and Vedder, Price.

Male lawyers often network while playing golf and attending sports events. Women lawyers also do those types of things, but the initiative wants to offer a range of other

opportunities to develop business, said Lona, a member of the group's steering committee.

The initiative "is really meant to explore other alternatives as to how women can promote themselves not only within their own law firms but also develop business," Lona said. "One of our ultimate goals is to see that law firms continue and improve upon their recruitment, retention and development of women lawyers into positions of leadership within the firm and within the legal community."

The initiative has several events planned beginning in late September and running through early 2009.

Among them are programs about generational differences among attorneys in law firms, the next generation of women lawyers and business development tips for women lawyers.

Each member firm has a main delegate and one or two alternate delegates. The member firms will receive one invitation to each program and the delegates can return to their respective firms and use information from the programs for those firms' internal initiatives, Auerbach said.

The group expects to hold one large annual event open to women lawyers from all member firms, Auerbach added.

The initiative is open to law firms of all sizes that have a Chicago office. The member firms pay annual dues ranging from \$1,500 to \$3,500 based on the size of the firm's Chicago office, according to Auerbach.

"We are still feeling our way both on our programming as well as our mission," Lona said.