

Talking Points – On Becoming a Local Chapter of NCAWA

From Dionne Fortner, President, and Holly Bryan, President-Elect

Understanding the local and the state relationship:

The North Carolina Association of Women Attorneys maintains two levels of governance: the state board and local chapters. Local chapters may be from a city, county, or region. Both groups endorse the core mission of NCAWA as stated in the state bylaws. Each local group may focus on a particular pillar as its primary objective, but the state board attempts to treat all objectives with equal attention.

Reasons for local organizations to affiliate with the state NCAWA:

Strength in the Foundation

NCAWA has existed for over 30 years. As the organization has grown, it has broadened its interpretation of helping the women of North Carolina and helping the women attorneys of NC. Many of the founding foremothers and early members maintain an active positive relationship with the organization, which provides a strong supportive network for newer members and chapters. Some of these women are leading litigators, others are now leading judges, but their connection through NCAWA continues to be important to them.

Networking and professional connections

NCAWA has almost 500 members and provides easy professional networking through local chapters and a directory organized by name, geographic location and area expertise. The annual conference, which alternates between the mountains and the beach, provides face-to-face time with other member attorneys and with Judges. A regular newsletter also allows a place for announcements and an opportunity for networking.

In addition, we have a very active judicial division, which is willing to share its wisdom and time with the organization's members. The judges frequently agree to serve on panels for both law school functions and for the conference.

CLE

Our annual conference typically supplies at least six hours of CLE over a wide array of subjects. This event is traditionally less expensive than many CLE conferences, and is even cheaper if you are an NCAWA member. Local chapters may also use CLE as a focal point of meetings.

Legislation

One of the great benefits of being a member of the statewide organization is that by pooling our resources we can prioritize as a state and utilize our lobbyists to help change law. Our legislative agenda is set by our Government Action committee, which is open to all members. Using our core objectives and our resolutions, this committee works with our lobbyist to set

priorities. Effecting change in the legislature is one of the ways we can best support our member attorneys and the women in North Carolina.

Community Outreach

Many local chapters enjoy working as a group to better their community. Successful local events can become models for similar events in other counties. The wisdom of the membership and their willingness to pass on what they have learned can help local attorneys develop themselves as strong board members. The statewide membership can provide advice and in-kind support. We are working to focus all chapters on a few common threads while allowing the independence of the chapters to flourish. National Equality Day, which honors the passage of the 19th Amendment, has been a day when many chapters have helped register people to vote. As leaders, local chapters can also be called on to help with Advocacy Day and to help with the Women's Agenda Assembly project. Not every chapter chooses to participate in these goals, but if they do participate, the state organization is there to help link these events across the state.

Career Support

Whether seeking advancement is breaking the "Glass Ceiling" at a large firm, finding the balance of life in a small firm, seeking appointments on commissions, or simply a need for a mentor, NCAWA can provide support for many aspects of one's career. Once a local chapter has identified the need, then the state resources may provide the support and wisdom in numbers to best strategize on how to help. Our Career Support Committee also offers the "Balanced Life Workplace Award" to help encourage law firms of all sizes to focus on the health of their attorneys and staff.

Strength in Numbers

The main reason to join is that as we add to our numbers, we add to our strength. Our ability to be heard in the general public, by the NCBA, by the NC State Bar, and by our employers and clients only strengthens as we grow. Joining the state organization is an opportunity to shape the state organization. Through the NCAWA structure, you can move from being a local leader to being a state leader. Without the state organization, the effect of your local group remains local at best.

Nuts and Bolts

We offer sample bylaws which can be used to help organize the local chapter. They are not required, but we do recommend that while developing your government structure you keep in mind transition and burnout. Our dues are to be paid in January, and the directory usually goes to print in March. All members of a chapter will receive a chapter rebate that goes back to the leader of the chapter. This ensures that part of your dues will be used at the local level. In addition, the state board supports the local chapters with an annual small stipend to help grow the chapter. NCAWA is a 501(c)(6) organization and so donations are not entirely deductible. In addition, we have a Political Action Committee which operates separately from the statewide organization. The PAC has a well-respected endorsement process which focuses on judicial races only.

Now what?

We recommend that you get together as a local group, review these benefits and discuss if you are ready to join. We can come speak to your group if you think they would find that helpful. Or you can just email Holly for more information at hmbryan@unc.edu.