



A major American law firm, with offices in Charlotte and across the Carolinas, that specializes in helping employers avoid workplace discrimination lawsuits, has been sued for workplace discrimination. - Observer file

LOCAL

# Law firm that helps employers avoid discrimination complaints is sued for discrimination

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January 16, 2018 12:58 PM  
Updated January 17, 2018 06:41 PM

A major law firm with deep roots in the Carolinas that specializes in helping employers avoid workplace discrimination complaints has been sued – on accusations of workplace discrimination.

The \$300 million class-action complaint against Ogletree, Deakins, Nash, Smoak & Stewart accuses the multinational firm of discriminating against its female attorneys by favoring their male counterparts in promotions and pay.

Male members of the firm also get more credit for attracting new clients even when women attorneys were directly responsible for recruiting the new business, the suit says. Female attorneys also are forced to handle a disproportionate share of the administrative duties, which cuts into their billable hours and reduces both their pay and chances of advancement, the suit says.

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In a statement released from its Atlanta headquarters, Ogletree said, “Equal Opportunity has been a core principle” of the firm from its beginning, “and we don’t tolerate discrimination of any kind – gender or otherwise.”

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The law firm said women make up more than half the firm’s employees, adding: “We will confidently defend the firm against these claims as we remain steadfast in our commitment to equal opportunity for all.”

The federal complaint was filed by a female Ogletree attorney in California. She claims in the lawsuit that the firm’s “male-dominated systems makes it extremely difficult for female non-equity shareholders to be promoted and paid at the same levels as equity shareholders, although they perform substantially similar work.”

One of her attorneys said Ogletree’s workplace practices undermine its expressed commitment to equal opportunity.

“It’s ironic that a law firm like Ogletree, which boasts of its diversity initiatives and prides itself on effectively counseling employers to avoid lawsuits, finds itself charged with practices that epitomize gender discrimination in the work place and at law firms in particular,” said David Sanford, a Washington, D.C., partner in the firm of Sanford Heisler Sharp and the lead attorney in the complaint.

Ogletree, which was founded in 1977 in Atlanta and Greenville, S.C., now has more than 50 offices in North America and Europe, including ones in Charlotte, Raleigh, Greensboro, Charleston and Columbia. Its 850 attorneys specialize in such areas as employee benefits and executive compensation, employment law, traditional labor law, and wage and hour matters.

On its website, Ogletree notes that it has been named among the country’s Top 100 firms for female attorneys, among other industry accolades for gender equity and opportunity. Its 2018 class of new associates, known as “shareholders” at the firm, is more than 70 percent women, the firm says.

On Ogletree’s board of directors, seven of the nine seats are held by men, its website shows. A listing of the firm’s top officers show that four of the six are male. Men, according to the complaint, hold 80 percent of the firm’s equity positions.

Jill Sanford, another of the filing attorneys, said the accusations against Ogletree comes with the country at a “cultural tipping point.”

“Women in the workplace will no longer tolerate unfair treatment, whether it comes in the form of sexual harassment or, as seems true at Ogletree, discriminatory pay and promotion practices that disadvantage women,” she said.

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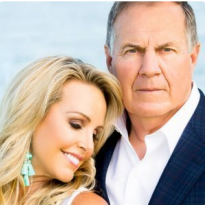
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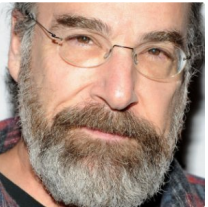
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