

State Bench Becoming More Diverse

By Amy Yarbrough

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SAN FRANCISCO- Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger is making progress on his commitment to bring more diversity to the state's courts, according to data released by the governor's office Thursday.

The data show Schwarzenegger appointed a greater percentage of black and Hispanic judges to the bench in 2008 than he's averaged since the start of his administration in 2003.

Last year, 8.3 percent of those he appointed to the bench were black and 13.5 percent were Hispanic. His appointments of candidates from both ethnic groups average 6.7 percent and 10.1 percent, respectively, since 2003.

Schwarzenegger also appointed higher percentages of black and Hispanic judges than the overall percentages of applicants from both ethnic groups. According to the recently released data, 20 applicants, or 7.63 percent of the total in 2008, identified as black, and 23 applicants, or 8.78 percent, identified as Hispanic.

Niki Solis, president elect of the San Francisco La Raza Lawyers Association, said the numbers are promising, but suggested that more work remains to be done.

Solis praised Schwarzenegger's Judicial Appointments Secretary Sharon Majors-Lewis for the effort she's made to put diverse judicial applicants on the bench.

Despite the overall diversity, Solis cautioned that greater emphasis should be paid to making the courts reflective of the communities they serve.

Solis points out that Schwarzenegger has only appointed one Hispanic woman to the bench in San Francisco since he took office, despite the fact that 14 percent of the city's population is Hispanic.

"These are causes for concern and we're doing everything we can to encourage a diverse pool of applicants," Solis said of her group.

The percentage of Asians appointed to the bench in 2008 6.3 percent - was slightly lower than the overall rate of 6.5 percent averaged during Schwarzenegger's administration. Seventeen Asians applied for judgeships in 2008, making up 6.49 percent of applicants.

Despite the static numbers, Edwin Prather, president of the Asian Bar of California, said Schwarzenegger has shown his commitment to diversity in the past.

Prather, also the group's judicial appointments chair, said the governor has appointed some stellar Asian judges to the bench in the Bay Area but that a lack of vacancies has been a challenge to bringing in more Asians.

"Building a strong and diverse bench does seem like a priority to (Schwarzenegger and Majors-Lewis), and they seem to be moving in that direction," Prather said.
