

American Bar Association Grants Full Governance Rights to Virgin Islands and Pacific Bar Associations After 40 Years

The American Bar Association has amended its constitution to grant full governance rights to USVI, Guam, CNMI, and American Samoa after nearly 40 years of advocacy, ensuring territorial lawyers a seat on the Board of Governors and Nominating Committee.

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A decades-long effort by territorial bar associations culminated in a landmark decision this month when the American Bar Association (ABA) voted to grant full governance representation to the U.S. Virgin Islands, Guam, the Commonwealth of the Northern Mariana Islands (CNMI), and American Samoa.

At the ABA's 2025 Annual Meeting, delegates approved Resolution 11-2 by a two-thirds majority, amending Sections 2.1 and 2.2 of the ABA Constitution, the V.I. Bar Association announced recently. The resolution, authored and submitted by Anthony M. Ciolli of VIBA, formally recognizes the four territories as states for governance purposes within the ABA. The decision comes nearly 40 years after the first petition from the territories for equal representation.

For the first time, lawyers from these jurisdictions will have not only delegate seats but also full participation rights in the association's leadership. That includes representation on the ABA Board of Governors and a seat on the Nominating Committee, elevating the voices of attorneys from the territories within the broader U.S. legal community.

"The U.S. Virgin Islands and the U.S. Pacific Territories have done their part to earn a seat at the table," Ciolli told the House of Delegates. "The support and encouragement we have received from all corners of the ABA has been humbling...I must especially acknowledge the support and friendship of the New York State Bar Association and the California Lawyers Association, particularly their past Presidents Sherry Levin Wallach and Emilio Varanini."

Guam Bar Association President Jacqueline Taitano Terlaje, who also represented the CNMI Bar Association as alternate delegate, urged delegates to approve the measure in a speech that underscored the significance of the moment. "Give the U.S. Territories a voice in the governance of this body. It gives the U.S. Territories after awaiting 40 years – inclusion and equality," she said.

The passage of Resolution 11-2 is being hailed as a milestone in the ABA's mission to foster inclusivity and equal participation across the profession. Leaders say the decision sends a strong signal that lawyers from the territories are integral members of the American legal community and should no longer be left without a voice in governance.

The Guam Bar Association, CNMI Bar Association, and Virgin Islands Bar Association expressed gratitude to Ciolli for his leadership and persistence in advancing the measure, as well as to ABA delegates for supporting equity in governance. "For our bar associations, this victory ensures that our voices will be heard, our perspectives represented, and our communities no longer forgotten," the organizations stated.