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As it turns 40, JAMS is expanding and innovating

By Erin Lee / Daily Journal Staff Writer

Coming up on JAMS' 40th anniversary, the alternative dispute resolution provider is expanding its international arbitration capabilities and facilities, according to CEO and President Chris Poole.

JAMS hopes to capitalize on the newly expanded market following the passage of SB 766, which allows out-of-state and foreign attorneys to participate in international arbitrations in California as of Jan. 1. The firm recently opened international arbitration centers in Los Angeles and New York, with three more planned for San Francisco, Miami and Chicago.

In Los Angeles, an entire floor of JAMS' offices was renovated to house the center. The panel includes existing neutrals with cross-border and international arbitration experience, as well as international arbitrators recruited specifically for the centers.

Poole said the firm will target the international intellectual property, technology, sports and entertainment industries, especially in China. Though he doesn't expect to see an immediate bump in the market, the timing was right to expand international arbitration capabilities, he said.

"LA is a good sort of Pacific Rim gateway," he said. "We think that [the bill] will cause an uptick in cross-border arbitration in California, but none of these things happen that quickly."

The international centers dovetail with several new cross-border partnerships based in China, including with the Shanghai Commercial Mediation Center, the Shenzhen Court of International Arbitration and the Beijing Arbitration Commission.

However, JAMS' domestic arbitration business is still its fastest growing practice, with arbitration overall growing at about 20 percent, according to Poole.

The firm added a Title IX practice last year aimed at helping universities resolve sexual harassment disputes. About 30 neutrals, primarily based in California, have received Title IX training and offer impartiality as a hearing officer in a sensitive, often contentious process, Poole said.



Emilio Aldea / Daily Journal photo

Chris Poole, president and CEO of JAMS, says the firm's international arbitration centers in Los Angeles and New York will be joined by three in San Francisco, Miami and Chicago.

A large state university system has signed an agreement with JAMS with a first batch of 60 to 70 cases, said Poole, who declined to name the university. JAMS has also been in talks with independent and small university systems.

JAMS also introduced a blockchain and smart contracts practice in September, and Poole expects growth in sports and entertainment in coming years.

The JAMS panel has about 375 neutrals and hopes to add 30 each year, according to Poole. Last year, 43 neutrals joined.

Panel expansion occurs in conjunction with renovating facilities, and JAMS has several projects in the works. The newly relocated Orange County office opened Tuesday with more hearing space and technological capabilities. The New York facility recently doubled in size, Chicago relocated last June and San Francisco is up next, Poole said.

"It sounds a little cocky, I guess, but I think the work will come," Poole said. "What we've seen is when we improve and modernize and expand our offices, they get busier."

JAMS also increased its emphasis on diver-

sity in recruiting several years ago and plans to hire a diversity officer this year, according to Poole. Overall, the panel is 28 percent women and 7 percent people of color. Last year's new recruits were 26 percent women and 12 percent people of color.

In May, JAMS introduced a diversity inclusion rider that clients can include in their contracts, stating that parties will seek fair representation of diverse arbitrators. Poole said it's too early to tell if the rider has been popular, but he hopes it will become standard practice.

"For us, we need to work on both ends. We need to work on the supply side and demand side to really make progress there," he said.

Poole said he hopes JAMS will add tools such as online dispute resolution capabilities or heavier reliance on smart contracts to improve its services.

"Our primary goal is really to just keep doing mostly the same thing, but doing it better," Poole said. "But at the same time, we want to be innovative ... because the legal industry is constantly changing."