

THE LAWYER WELL-BEING MOVEMENT

A national task force report recommends 44 ways to a healthier environment for attorneys.

BY ERIC QUITUGUA

Bree Buchanan built an impressive resume during her law career. Along the way, she became an alcoholic. Abusing alcohol, along with prescription drugs, was, in Buchanan's words, an effective way to deal with the stress and anxiety of law school and a legal career. But after losing her job with a nonprofit, she realized she needed help.

"It worked until it didn't work anymore," said Buchanan, director of the Texas Lawyers' Assistance Program, or TLAP, which provides confidential help to law students, lawyers, and judges who have problems with substance abuse or mental health issues. "At some point, the abuse of those things started to turn into an addiction and, ultimately, the house of cards that I had built began to tumble. I lost my marriage, and I lost my job."

As co-chair of the National Task Force on Lawyer Well-Being, Buchanan hopes her story can put a face on recovery. In August, the task force—a group of American Bar Association members and non-ABA members—released a report with 44 recommendations for a healthier environment for attorneys.

Though there is no one-size-fits-all approach to changing the culture, "The Path to Lawyer Well-Being: Practical Recommendations for Positive Change" focuses on five general areas: (1) identifying stakeholders and the role each plays in reducing toxicity in law practice, (2) ending the stigma on trying to improve well-being, (3) emphasizing that an attorney's well-being is vital to their ability to work, (4) educating attorneys, judges, and law students on mental health and substance use disorders, and (5) creating a culture that prioritizes self-care and helping others.

Attorneys, the task force's report concluded, are at a higher risk for threats to well-being than people in many other professions.

Perhaps the biggest threat to an attorney's well-being is the stigma surrounding it. Shame over mental health problems and substance abuse and addiction is a societal problem but it's even more acute in the legal world, Buchanan said. The report identified several reasons why an attorney may keep quiet about their struggles: fear of adverse reactions, fear of career repercussions, appearing weak, or maintaining an air of self-

reliance. The problem becomes amplified when attorneys internalize their struggles.

The best way to reduce stigma is putting a face to recovery, Buchanan said, and the way to do it is connecting with someone who is dealing with the disorder or the issue. She credits the genesis of her sobriety to the guidance of a TLAP volunteer attorney who offered support for getting into and maintaining recovery.

But why are attorneys more susceptible to stress, burnout, drug abuse, or disorders like bipolar or depression? It's a whirlwind of the profession's adversarial nature and incivility, where interactions between attorneys, clients, judges, legal staff, and others can turn toxic. Too much of it, and courtrooms can become breeding grounds for burnout and emotional and physiological damage, the report found.

Last year, the American Bar Association Commission on Lawyer Assistance Programs and the Hazelden Betty Ford Foundation released a study that found that 32 percent of lawyers 30 years old or younger have a drinking problem, 28 percent of lawyers struggle with some level of depression, and 11 percent of lawyers have had suicidal thoughts at some point in their

career. It shed light on some harsh realities about the legal profession and brought to the forefront a disturbing fact: younger lawyers and law students were developing drinking problems.

"As I went through law school, I developed an anxiety disorder," Buchanan said. "I resorted to the accepted way to deal with stress and anxiety, which was to drink and drink heavily."

It's Buchanan's hope that the task force report will encourage a climate of change. "We have to create a culture in the legal profession where help-seeking is encouraged," Buchanan said. "If you have a problem, get help." Substance use disorders, addiction, and major depression are not curable, but just like diabetes or heart disease, they are manageable, she said. "Get healthy rather than hiding it," Buchanan said. "Step up to the plate and take care of your health." **TBJ**

To get help or more information, call 1-800-343-8527 (TLAP) or go to tlaphelps.org. To read a copy of the task force's report, go to texasbar.com/wellbeing_report.

**"We have to
create a culture
in the legal
profession
where
help-seeking
is encouraged."**