

Culture Shift

A look at how focusing on well-being and self-care can help save lives in the legal profession.

BY ERIC QUITUGUA

In June, a myriad legal professionals gathered in Austin for the first meeting of the Roundtable on Well-Being in the Legal Profession—a group formed to discuss ideas for systematic change in the legal profession in Texas. Those assembled—Texas Supreme Court justices; judges; law school deans; executive directors of the State Bar of Texas, Texas Board of Law Examiners, the State Commission on Judicial Conduct, and the Texas Center for Legal Ethics; members of the Texas Access to Justice Commission; and presidents of the State Bar, the Texas Young Lawyers Association, and Texas Lawyers Concerned for Lawyers, among others—broke into five work groups, which will meet over the next several months to brainstorm ways to integrate well-being into the profession.

“Handling stress is part of being a lawyer...,” Texas Supreme Court Chief Justice Nathan L. Hecht said at the discussion, held at the Texas Law Center. “We want lawyers to be able to handle it productively.”

It’s from high stress that substance abuse and symptoms of depression and anxiety are exacerbated. The way people handle it can have fatal consequences as a few attorneys at the discussion attested. One lost a friend who died from alcoholism just before his daughter’s grad-

uation. Another lost her husband, a district attorney, to suicide.

In 2017, the National Task Force on Lawyer Well-Being released its report “The Path to Lawyer Well-Being: Practical Recommendations for Positive Change,” which made 44 recommendations for a healthier environment for attorneys. Though there is no one-size-fits-all approach to changing the culture, the report focused on five general areas: (1) identifying stakeholders and the role each plays in reducing toxicity in law practice, (2) ending the stigma surrounding attorneys seeking help, (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. The report concluded that attorneys are at a higher risk for threats to well-being than people in many other professions.

The roundtable attendees graded the current state of Texas lawyers’ mental health and services and set goals for the bar through fictional news headlines. Though grades hovered at a “C,” the roundtable participants later organized into groups and put forth ideas they believe can improve resources and boost the culture of self-help in the state’s legal profession. One idea was to require law students to take psychological assessments for risk factors, as well as for career planning. Other suggestions included wellness certifications for law schools and firms, and active bystander training, where non-verbal cues for risk factors are a focus.

Recurring headline phrases highlighted goals Texas’ legal community wants to achieve: “reduce the stigma,” “cast away embarrassment and shame,” and “Texas leads nation in lawyers’ self satisfaction.”

Sakina Foster, chair of the Texas Lawyers’ Assistance Program Committee, told the *Texas Bar Journal* that of the core steps of the well-being report, educational outreach and programming is already a big part of TLAP’s mission.

“TLAP reaches tens of thousands of lawyers, law students, and judges in Texas every year with this critical outreach,” she said. “I have witnessed firsthand the impact TLAP makes when they present at a law firm—they truly partner with firms to educate and empower their attorneys on these important issues.”

The program, under TLAP Director Bree Buchanan’s leadership, is at work on a high-quality video that features leaders in the bar who are in recovery, talking about the importance of seeking help for mental health and substance use disorders. As the task force’s report points out, people sharing their personal experiences with these issues is one way to directly reduce stigma, Foster said.

For all the state’s leaders involved, the cultural shift won’t happen overnight. It will take repeated education and evolving action plans, they said, to not only support attorneys living with a host of struggles, including depression, anxiety, suicidal thoughts, substance abuse, and cognitive decline, but also to make it all right to seek help.

“Showing vulnerability is actually strength,” Buchanan told the *Texas Bar Journal*. “If the warriors in the military can do it, then the warriors in the legal profession can.” **TBJ**

James M. Donovan, Jr.

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(214) 437-9187 | JamesDonovanarbitrator@yolasite.com