

Chicago Daily Law Bulletin®

Volume 157, No. 80

Group helps lawyers with mental health issues

BY JOHN FLYNN ROONEY
Law Bulletin staff writer

For more than 25 years, the Lawyers' Assistance Program Inc. dealt primarily with addiction issues impacting lawyers.

But during the past three years, reports of Illinois lawyers dealing with mental health issues, including depression and suicidal tendencies, has been on an upswing, said Janet Piper Voss, LAP's Executive Director.

"We're seeing so many cases of just mental health [issues], without the addiction," Voss said. "That's what's changed so drastically in the past few years.

"I think the economy is a factor, but not a cause and effect," Voss said.

In 2008, for the first time in LAP's history, the program reported that 43 percent of its caseload related to psychological issues compared to 27 percent with chemical dependency issues. In 2009, those numbers stood at 44 percent and 26 percent, respectively.

The fiscal year for LAP, which was founded in 1980, runs from July 1 to June 30. During the first nine months of the current fiscal year, LAP has had 189 clients, the majority being sole practitioners, said Robin M. Belleau, LAP's clinical director.

LAP's caseload so far this fiscal year comprises 110 cases involving psychological issues and 115 clients with chemical dependency, abuse or addiction issues, Belleau said. Some clients struggle with both mental health and addiction issues, she said.

Depression was the most reported problem to LAP among the psychological issues, which also include stress and anxiety, along with grief. Lawyers with severe depression can attempt suicide or contemplate the act.

Lawyers have one of the highest rates of suicide, Belleau said.

LAP experienced two suicides in both 2008 and 2009. A Chicago-area lawyer committed suicide in 2010, while a local law school student did the same in 2007.

Since last summer, LAP has dealt with three attempted suicides and eight cases of so-



Lawrence R. Scanlon (right), a part-time clinical case manager for the Lawyers' Assistance Program Inc., was introduced to Matthew A. Hutmacher (left) by Janet Piper Voss (center), LAP's executive director, during the program's second annual Joseph R. Bartylak Dinner in late March at the Governor's Mansion in Springfield. *Lane Christiansen*

called suicide ideation, but no suicides as of the end of March, Belleau said.

The issue of lawyers struggling with depression or thoughts of suicide "doesn't need to be something that alarms people because there is good help" available, Voss said.

In April, LAP began a second group in Chicago for some lawyers struggling with depression.

Belleau said working with lawyers addressing mental health issues takes more time than dealing with lawyers facing alcohol and drug addictions.

"The issues in mental health, whether depression or bipolar [disorder], are so much more complicated for volunteers to deal with, for family members to deal with and for the actual participants to deal with," Belleau said.

Belleau, a licensed Illinois lawyer who previously practiced law, has

served as the program's clinical director since August 2010. She is a licensed clinical professional counselor.

"We have so many more people calling in just for stress and anxiety issues from how to cope with being a lawyer," Belleau said.

A national issue

Voss said that earlier this year she attended the American Bar Association's Commission on Lawyers Assistance Programs meeting, where colleagues from other states indicated they have seen increasing depression, stress and anxiety among lawyers.

"This is the kind of thing we're hearing about across the country," Voss said. "It's not unique to Illinois."

Daniel T. Lukasik, a Buffalo, N.Y. lawyer, said research has shown that about 20 percent of lawyers suffer from depression, which is twice the national percentage of people with depression.

"That would mean that about 200,000 of this country's 1 million lawyers are struggling with depression right now," said Lukasik, who has suffered from depression and began a website, lawyerswithdepression.com, about four years ago, along with a blog, lawyerswithdepression.wordpress.com, about a year ago.

Lukasik also produced a 30-minute documentary called, "Terrible Melancholy: Depression in the Legal Profession," which he shows around the country.

"Most lawyers don't get treatment and the most tragic consequence of that is suicide," Lukasik said.

The blog is about "my personal experiences practicing law and dealing with stress, anxiety and depression," Lukasik said.

The website gets about 25,000 hits a month from all over the world, Lukasik said.

"My message and example is

that I've been a successful practicing lawyer, while I've had depression," Lukasik said. "The reason I say that is to suggest to others that there are many, many successful lawyers in this country who are struggling with [depression] and you can recover from it."

In 2007, LAP started a group to assist lawyers dealing with depression, Voss said. The group of five to seven lawyers, which met for up to two hours once a week was overseen by Susan Riegler, Belleau's predecessor as LAP's clinical director. The group of unemployed lawyers met for more than two years before all the members found work and the group disbanded, Voss said.

"It just became a practical means of giving them more support than we could give them on an individual basis," Voss said.

Marie's story

A lawyer named Marie, 55, who did not want her full name used, was a participant in the depression group. Confidentiality for the participants in LAP is guaranteed under Illinois Rule 1.6 (d) of the Illinois Rules of Professional Conduct.

Marie said she was severely depressed due to a chemical imbalance. In 2007, she tried to commit suicide.

She had worked as a lawyer for government agencies and in private practice. After her attempt, Marie's sister urged her to call LAP.

Marie called LAP on a Friday afternoon and spoke to Riegler for two hours. Riegler also called Marie several times over that weekend and provided her with the name of a psychiatrist who prescribed medication.

"That really saved me," Marie said. "I didn't try to kill myself after that. Someone actually knew how I felt."

Marie, who now works full time as a contract lawyer, attended the depression group for about 2½ years.

"It was really like my lifeline," Marie said. "Everybody really understood where everybody else was coming from."

Another depression group began meeting in early April with six members, Belleau said. That group is facilitated by Lawrence R. Scanlon, LAP's new part-time clinical case manager.

"There is a significant need for a support group for depression and dealing with stress and anxiety because so many sole practitioners don't have health insurance or the financial means to participate in either an individual or group insurance plan," Belleau said.

Belleau said she envisions the new group adding several more members.

When a local lawyer calls LAP with an anxiety or depression issue,



James M. Radcliffe III (right), the Lawyers' Assistance Program's associate director, and Robin M. Belleau, LAP's clinical director, talked with other guests at a program dinner in Springfield during late March. Lane Christiansen

he or she is typically invited to visit LAP's Chicago office for an assessment, Belleau said.

Once an assessment is completed, LAP officials decide if that lawyer can work with a mental health professional on an outpatient basis, if the person needs hospitalization or more intensive treatment, Belleau said.

LAP officials help the lawyers find an appropriate place to go or a list of places and make sure the lawyers follow up, Belleau said.

James M. Radcliffe III, LAP's associate director who works out of a Belleville office, said he sees more lawyers with mental health issues than he did when he began in the position three years ago.

"Law practice can be stressful, especially for [sole practitioners] who can get isolated," Radcliffe said. "We can generally find a volunteer who has experienced something similar and help someone work through those issues."

About 300 trained LAP volunteers provide peer support to attorneys, judges and law students with problems or support to their colleagues or family members.

The 'Happy Law Student'

LAP also has started making presentations to law students called "The Happy Law Student: The Path From Stress to Well-Being."

Earlier this year, Belleau made the presentation to about 35

University of Chicago Law School students.

"The main points of the presentation are to identify what is stressful about law school and the practice of law," Belleau said.

She also talks about how lawyers and law students "see stress as something very normal, almost as a badge of honor, but that a high level of ongoing stress is not healthy. It can lead to variety of mental health and-or addiction issues."

LAP officials have also seen more cases of dementia among lawyers recently, Voss said.

"It's something I think we're going to see more of," Voss said. "I think many lawyers who expected to be retired by a certain age are continuing to work out of financial necessity."

John R. Cesario, a senior counsel with the Attorney Registration and Disciplinary Commission, deals with age-related impairment matters impacting lawyers.

"Often times, I will get calls from family members or colleagues who tell me they think a lawyer has gotten to the point where he should close his practice," Cesario said. "I have worked with family members and others to make suggestions about things to do to close a law office."

Mental health issues are not limited to sole practitioners and other lawyers in private practice or the public sector.

"We've had judges come to us

because they're struggling with depression," Voss said. "We're also seeing some judges [mentally] impaired."

James E. Ryan, former Illinois Attorney General, spoke at LAP's 2009 annual dinner about addiction and mental health issues generally and provided a personal account about how some of those problems severely impacted his own family.

Ryan and his wife are the parents of six children. Their youngest daughter died of a brain tumor and youngest son, who had bipolar disorder and struggled with depression, committed suicide at age 24, Ryan said.

Ryan survived cancer and his wife suffered cardiac arrest, he said.

"We've had our share of challenges like a lot of other families," Ryan said.

Ryan acknowledged that he was depressed when his children died, but doesn't believe he was clinically depressed.

"I certainly had a lot of low moments," Ryan said.

But Ryan, now a distinguished fellow at Benedictine University in Lisle, said he tries to stay busy and relies on his Catholic faith and remains close to his family.

"I think it's good for lawyers to develop a faith life," Ryan said. "I think they need to exercise. I think they need to spend time with their family [and] not just work from morning to night."