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JLAP: Lawyer wellness push extends beyond law firms

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By Tim A. Baker

The recent emphasis on lawyer well-being is not limited to private law firms. Corporate legal departments, the public sector and other legal employers are embracing some of the wellness initiatives being implemented at many law firms.

“We see people from all sectors,” said Terry Harrell, executive director of the Indiana Judges and Lawyers Assistance Program. JLAP provides confidential counseling, referrals and other assistance for lawyers, judges and law students who struggle with a wide variety of issues impacting their personal and professional lives.

“We see lawyers that work for firms, for government agencies, work in-house for corporations, work in hospitals and even teach,” remarked Harrell, chair of the American Bar Association Working Group to Advance Well-Being in the Legal Profession. “I guess stress is pretty even-handed.”

Harrell was a member of the National Task Force on Lawyer Well-Being that issued a series of sweeping recommendations in August 2017. Shortly thereafter, the ABA working group Harrell chairs issued a substance abuse and mental health “toolkit” to provide a user-friendly resource full of concrete steps that can be taken to tackle these issues. The ABA working group also encouraged legal employers to adopt a pledge to support a seven-point framework designed to combat substance abuse, mental health issues and related problems among legal employers.

The first in-house legal department to adopt the ABA pledge was 3M Company, a global Fortune 500 enterprise headquartered in Minnesota that employs more than 200

attorneys and a legal staff of about 500 people. “No one benefits from a burned-out lawyer or legal professional,” said Maureen Harms, associate general counsel and managing counsel for 3M. Harms credited Ivan Fong, 3M’s vice president of legal affairs and general counsel, for adopting the pledge and having a vision for including lawyer well-being in the corporate legal environment. Since the task force report came out, Fong “has taken to heart how the legal profession is taking care of itself, and is concerned that the demands of our clients, the scarcity of our resources and the complexity of our work affects the ability to provide the best services to our clients,” Harms said.

3M’s wellness program is multi-faceted. For example, in 2018, 3M conducted an “energy audit survey” to assess employees’ mental, physical, spiritual and emotional energy levels. “We came back with some results that are surprising to us,” Harms said. “We had more of a stress level than we expected.” In response, 3M hired a psychologist to speak to the legal department about how to decrease stress levels. 3M also has incorporated mindfulness and meditation components into its training. And social events, including a bowling outing for new lawyers, de-emphasize alcohol.

3M isn’t the only Fortune 500 company to adopt wellness initiatives into its workforce. Closer to home, Cummins, Inc., a global power leader headquartered in Columbus, Indiana, also has implemented steps to improve the well-being of its attorneys and all employees.

Though most Cummins attorneys work at its new downtown Indianapolis headquarters for global distribution, Cummins lawyers work all over the world in such places as Mexico, Brazil, China, India, Australia and the United Kingdom. “That’s one of the things that makes our wellness initiative a challenge,” said Natalie J. Stucky, Cummins’ assistant general counsel — real estate and environmental.

Stucky and a colleague in Australia are leading a wellness initiative for the Cummins legal team. Last year, the focus was on stress management, which included a program presented by Harrell.

“The feedback was good,” Stucky said. “Everybody recognizes we are all stressed out.”

Cummins’ global wellness program is founded on eight pillars of wellness that include mental wellness (positive thinking), physical wellness (nutrition and exercise) and community wellness (giving back to the community). Stucky said Cummins strives to offer monthly programs for employees that incorporate these eight pillars. These programs work well for Cummins’ global business because, as Stucky explained, the programs can be tailored to emphasize what makes the most sense in a particular region. “The idea is to do what works for them,” Stucky said.

The public sector of the legal world is also emphasizing wellness. The office of the Indiana Attorney General, which employs more than 140 attorneys, has implemented a number of wellness initiatives that match up well with the toolkit, said John Walls, director of human resources for the Attorney General’s office.

Walls said his office offers a robust and expanding employee assistance program that, beginning this year, offers eight free face-to-face counseling sessions with a licensed therapist. “That’s a very rich program compared to what might be available to most people out there,” Walls said.

The AG’s office also has embraced the concept of employee engagement, creating in

2018 an. Employee Engagement Team. The team meets bi-weekly to develop ways to make the office more healthful and engaged. One result was the creation of an employee step challenge, which tracks the number of steps taken by participating employees, thereby encouraging employees to be active. The step challenge typically includes a theme that for the time of year or for a particular holiday.

The Attorney General's office also started the I-DAG program for new attorneys. The one-year program rotates new attorneys through all practice areas of the office, assigns them an experienced mentor, and groups their work stations together in the office.

"As a public sector employer, we face a common issue," Walls said. "Sometimes we don't have the resources you might have in the private sector, but we find creative ways to deal with that."

Harrell noted different legal employers will offer varied wellness options depending on a variety of factors, including whether the employer is a law firm, a corporation or a government agency. Yet there is one constant. "We are all human beings, regardless of where people work," she said. •

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