

Addressing the Mental Health and Well-Being of Judges and Court Employees

A Pandemic Resource

Developed in collaboration with the National Judicial Task Force to Examine State Courts' Response to Mental Illness

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Mental health issues in the workplace have been a subject of concern for some time, but the pandemic has brought those concerns to a level of urgency for every organization, including the courts. The COVID-19 crisis has led to a spike in the range of challenges judges and employees confront. In addition to physical protection measures in place, all courts should know where to find reliable information, guidance, and support for mental health. The purpose of this brief is to help court leaders promote a mentally healthy workplace by reducing pandemic-related stress within the workforce. Individual state responses addressing the mental health and well-being of judicial system employees are provided, along with links to resources, best practices, and tips. Enhancing channels of communication is especially important so court leaders respond to needs. A workplace assessment tool is included to assist courts and system partners in identifying strengths and gaps in the well-being areas of leadership, access, culture, and awareness.

A recent Society for Human Resource Management (SHRM) [survey](#) found that 41% of workers feel burned out due to factors like working remotely, working longer hours, juggling family demands, threatened job security, and fear of unsafe working environments. These factors can affect individual psychological health and contribute to anxiety, depression, and loneliness, conditions that can lead to an increase in substance abuse, stress, depression, suicidal thoughts, and trauma-related disorders. This epidemic extends to judges and court employees and may be exacerbated by the often face-to-face nature of the work performed.

Addressing the needs and concerns of judges and court employees is paramount if we are to gain and maintain the public's trust and confidence that our courts will administer justice fairly among cases where eviction, child protection, public safety, and the resolution of civil and family disputes are at stake.

Focusing on the well-being of our workforce is as important as maximizing the use of technology, reconfiguring courtrooms and courthouses to provide social distancing, identifying strategies to hold virtual jury trials, and determining how to return to "business as usual." Court leaders set the tone by actively listening to employee concerns and by

helping the court workforce be comfortable in voicing those concerns. The diversity of our court workforce should also always be kept in mind. Individual needs, experiences, and perceptions are varied and so can be very different from one judge or employee to the next.



ONE MIND AT WORK

Collaboration with [One Mind At Work](#), Mental Health America, and the American Psychiatric Association Foundation was identified early on in the pandemic as an important opportunity for state courts. Building on the well-received June 2020 webinar [Addressing the Mental Health and Well-Being of Judges and Court Employees in Tense Times](#), state court leaders in Arizona, Indiana, and Illinois are learning more about the services and resources available through One Mind At Work. One Mind At Work offers a tool to gauge the strengths and gaps of individual courts or a court system across four key areas of workplace mental health (leadership, access, culture, and awareness) through their [Workplace Mental Health Assessment](#). The result is an approach tailored to each jurisdiction or state, advising teams, and connecting states with experts to help expand or improve court workplace mental health supports and services, which are especially important during the pandemic. As further experience is gained, the National Judicial Task Force to Examine State Courts' Response to Mental Illness will share its recommendations with Chief Justices and State Court Administrators.



HELPFUL TIPS AND BEST PRACTICES

Promoting mental health and building overall organizational health can be facilitated through several practices.

- Be authentic. Leadership, no matter what your position, is more important now than ever before. Acknowledge that it is okay to not be okay. Ask your colleagues and employees how they are doing and how you can best support them.
- Get to know your Employee Assistance Program (EAP), Lawyer Assistance Program (LAP), and other well-being resources already available so you can communicate effectively about available resources and connect others with them.
- Designate a leadership team to examine the One Mind At Work [resources](#).

- Develop policies, cultures, and practices that influence the state of judicial employee health and well-being. The Tristan Jepson Memorial Foundation [Best Practice Guidelines for the Legal Profession](#) suggests twelve (12) areas that define psychologically healthy workplaces: organizational culture of trust, honesty, and fairness; psychological and social support; clear leadership and expectations; civility and respect; psychological competencies; growth and development; fair and timely recognition and rewards; involvement and influence; workload management; work engagement; balance between work and non-work priorities; and psychological protection.
- Take the [Organizational Assessment](#) and identify possible priorities for your court environment.
- Show empathy and practice mindfulness. In a recent presentation, Judge Steven Leifman discusses the role of empathy in life, and in judging. It is never the wrong time to show empathy and practice mindfulness. Now, it is even more important than ever. Judge Leifman offers his perspective on how judges and court staff can be kind, practice mindfulness, and help court patrons during these difficult times. Access this program at [NCSC Tiny Chat: Empathy](#).
- Demonstrate compassion through explicit acknowledgment of employee challenges and struggles as seen in this North Carolina [Caring for You](#) pandemic video.



STATE-SPECIFIC WELLNESS INITIATIVES

In addition to employee assistance programs available in state court systems, several courts developed new employee well-being programs that provide pandemic-related resources and education to address the well-being of judicial branch employees.

- **Colorado** – The Colorado Task Force on Judicial Well-Being has created a [website with resources](#) for judges and other court employees to address various areas of wellness.
- **Florida** – The Florida Judicial Wellness Program (FJWP) is a statewide program offered by the Florida Conference of Circuit Judges that is available to assist all members of the Florida judiciary and their families. Learn more about the Judicial Wellness Program in this [article](#) and [video](#).

- **Georgia** – In partnership with the [State Bar](#), the [strategic plan](#) of Georgia’s Judicial Council includes a [wellness component](#) supporting wellness and good mental health for everyone in the Georgia judicial branch. A joint venture of the Bar and Council will include a Suicide Awareness Program and a separate Wellness Program.
- **Massachusetts** – The Massachusetts Supreme Judicial Court Standing Committee on Lawyer Well-Being is working to implement recommendations from its Steering Committee Report, including developing programs and tackling initiatives which improve judicial well-being. For more information, visit their site [here](#).
- **Michigan** - The Michigan Court System offers a variety of local and national resources to support employee well-being during the trying times created by the pandemic. Guidance related to emotional health support and tips for staying healthy may be accessed [here](#).
- **Utah** – The Utah State Bar’s Well-Being Committee for the Legal Profession, developed in conjunction with the Utah Supreme Court, focuses on providing education, resources, and assistance that focus on improving mental health and overall well-being in the profession. Free evidence-based information, tools, and resources may be found [here](#).
- **Virginia** – Virginia’s Wellness Initiative coordinates education and assistance for judges, court staff, lawyers, and law students about professional health and wellness initiatives with a specific focus on improving mental health and addressing substance abuse. Information is shared through the Weekly WellNote, providing practice pointers aimed at improving all areas of wellness. Subscribe or share the Weekly WellNote [here](#).



RESOURCES and RESEARCH

- American Bar Association (ABA)
 - [National Resources for Judges](#)
 - [Coping with Covid-19: A Judicial Wellness Check-up](#)
 - [Survey report revealing key drivers of judicial stress \(article\)](#)
 - [Stress and Resiliency in the U.S. Judiciary](#)
 - [Well-being Toolkit for Lawyers and Legal Employers](#)

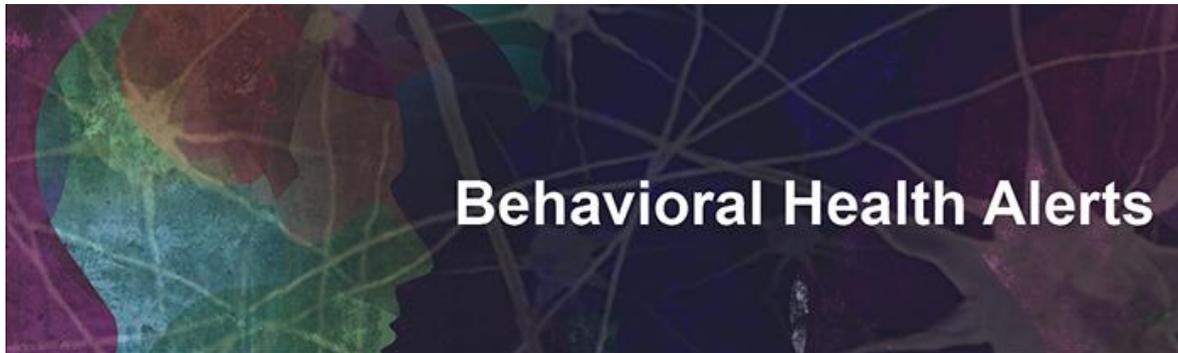
- American Psychiatric Association (APA). [Foundation's Center of Workplace Mental Health](#)
- Center for Disease Control (CDC)
 - [Well-being defined](#)
 - [Mental Health and Coping During COVID-19](#)
 - [Taking Care of Your Emotional Health](#)
- Dave Nee Foundation. Offering [education, programming, and assistance](#) for lawyers, law students, and their loved ones to help eliminate the stigma associated with depression and suicide and promote and encourage the diagnosis and treatment of depression.
- National Association of Women Judges (NAWJ). [Knowing the Causes and Signs of Judicial Distress](#).
- National Center for State Courts (NCSC). [Vicarious Trauma in the Courts](#).
- National Institute of Mental Health (NIMH). [My Mental Health: Do I Need Help?](#)
- Policy Research Associates (PRA). [Making the Workplace Whole: Meeting Basic Human Needs](#).
- Psych Hub. [Mental Health & Wellness in the Workplace](#) - The Mental Health and Wellness in the Workplace Initiative serves to engage HR professionals and people managers in education and training opportunities to build skills in leading mental health and wellness changes in the workplace, to help end the stigma of mental health in professional settings, and to ensure a culture of acceptance and assistance inculcated into the ethos of each workplace.
- Serious Mental Illness (SMI) Adviser. [Find Answers About Serious Mental Illness | SMI Adviser](#) - Serious Mental Illness (SMI) Adviser is funded by the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA) and administered by the American Psychiatric Association (APA). The APA works closely on this project with a team of experts from 30 other mental health organizations. This team includes individuals, families, clinical experts, peers, and policy makers – all working to create access to the best resources on serious mental illness (SMI).
- Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA). Provides [suicide prevention information](#) and other helpful resources to behavioral health professionals, the general public, and people at risk.

PODCASTS AND WEBINARS

- [Addressing Court Workplace Mental Health and Well-being in Tense Times](#)
- [Calming Practices During Trying Times: Maintaining the Best Version of Yourself](#)
- [Coronavirus – Supporting Employee Mental Health During a Pandemic](#)
- [Court Leader’s Advantage](#). Wildfires, Protests, and COVID: How Have Courts Coped with Compounding Crises? ([Part 1](#); [Part 2](#))
- [Crisis & Trauma Institute](#)
 - [Mental Health and Resilience](#)
 - [Wellness Strategies](#)
 - [Managing Your Stress](#)

BEHAVIORAL HEALTH ALERTS

Discover the latest data, research, and informative resources related to the intersection of behavioral health and the courts in the semimonthly [Behavioral Health Alerts](#) newsletter. Subscribe [here](#).



NATIONAL JUDICIAL TASK FORCE TO EXAMINE STATE COURTS' RESPONSE TO MENTAL ILLNESS