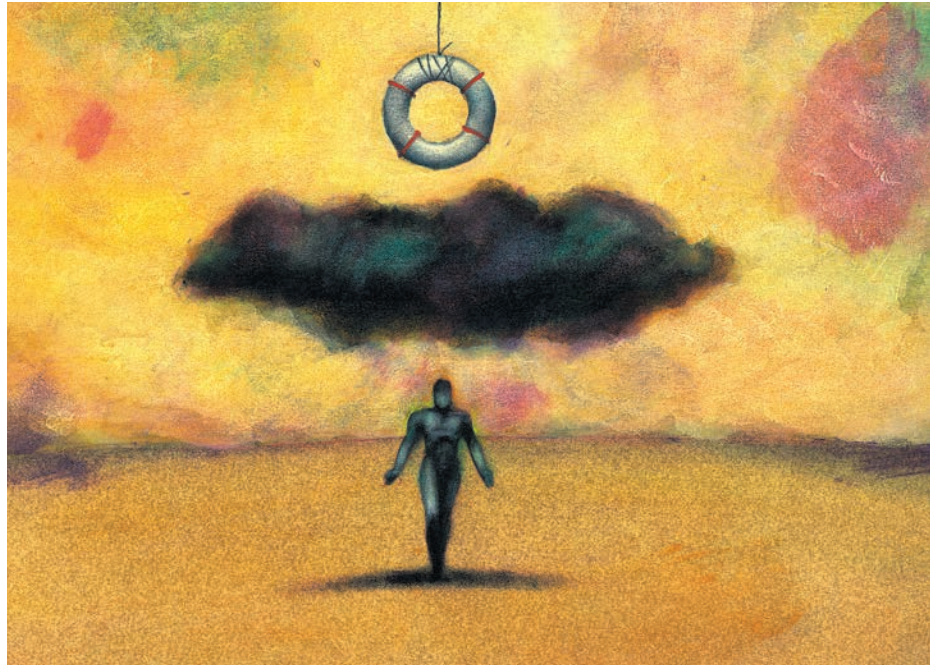


# Being the Change: Improving Well-Being in the Legal Profession

By TANYEE CHEUNG

**A**t the Well-Being Summit this March, our keynote speaker, Heidi Alexander, President-Elect of The Institute for Well-Being in Law (IWIL), asked, “Can lawyers thrive?” Based on headlines, we might well doubt this is possible. An article in *The Washington Post*<sup>1</sup> from earlier this year cautioned readers that if they want to be happy, they shouldn’t be a lawyer, advising readers that practicing law is the most stressful occupation in the US. Somehow, we lawyers managed to get ourselves to a place where wielding a pen is more stressful than wielding a scalpel or a chainsaw. A May 2022 article from the *ABA Journal*<sup>2</sup> reported that 19 percent of respondents in a survey of lawyers and staffers from Biglaw contemplated suicide at some point in their careers, and research from the Nee Foundation ranked American lawyers 5th occupationally in the incidence of suicide. The harsh statistics surrounding well-being in the legal profession is not new and for many, the “statistics” are all too real. Studies show that lawyers have some of the highest rates of depression, anxiety, and substance abuse and if not suffering ourselves, the probability is high that we know someone who is.<sup>3</sup>

But the challenges we face are only half the story. There is great work being done across our country to help raise consciousness and provide tools to improve well-being throughout the legal community. In 2017, a National Task Force on Lawyer Well-Being was formed and in 2021, that task force became the Institute for Well-Being in Law (IWIL), a formal 501(c)(3) entity. These initiatives and state-



centric well-being advocates have fueled a movement toward well-being in law and have provided invaluable support to help bring greater education and awareness on how to attain greater well-being. IWIL assists states with important research and scholarship by supporting state and local research, aggregating research and survey data, and conducting longitudinal studies. Through conferences and content, IWIL is not only shining a light on the challenges in our community, they are also providing tools to overcome them. Their creation of Well-Being Week in Law asks the legal community to come together one week every year to highlight all the ways that we can bring greater wellness into our lives. Building on the foundational support of IWIL, states across the country are focusing on well-being and have used this week to feature some of the many options available to improve well-being in the legal community. I am happy to report that

Connecticut eagerly joined this movement and continues to bring well-being to the workplace.

**It has been an exciting year**, starting with the Connecticut Bar Association’s (CBA) first ever Well-Being Summit in March. During the inaugural summit, we were treated to an amazing presentation from Heidi Alexander, who stressed the importance of a two-pronged approach toward progress and thriving in the legal profession: individual action and structural solutions. Attendees were given concrete examples of ways to increase individual well-being through mindfulness practices, setting healthy boundaries, asking for help, developing healthy body habits such as good sleep and nutrition and cultivating healthy relationships. The Well-Being Summit gave attendees an opportunity to work their individual well-being muscles, offering meditation and sound healing

practices and allowing attendees to reconnect with old friends and colleagues. You can read more about the summit on page 12 of this issue.

**For the second prong**, we were reminded of the work that must be done on a systemic level if we hope to make meaningful impact. As change agents for institutions, those of us who can, must take action to foster well-being. One of the many ways we can champion the well-being movement is by providing a more open and supportive work environment. In doing so, we can help alleviate the greatest barrier to individuals seeking help for their mental health and substance abuse challenges and the stigma associated with these challenges. It is important to bear in mind that as lawyers, we are ill-equipped to deal with these pressing issues that face our profession. The first step as change agents and leaders is to recognize the need for training. There are experts that can provide partners and managers the awareness and skills they need to build a safer environment. Unfortunately, much of the legal profession remains steeped in a world where focus is placed on “billable hours” and “instant response times,” encouraging burn-out and turning a blind eye to the importance of a healthy workforce. By partnering with experts in the well-being space, partners and managers can learn how to lead with compassion, and to value their team members for their skill and worth rather than their billable hours or how quickly they respond to an email. We can equip mentors with the tools for greater well-being and empower them to share their experiences and connect through healthy activities such as exercise and meaningful contribution (e.g. habit for humanity). Organizations can consider workshops to help address unconscious bias, microaggressions, and civility in the workplace. The Well-being Summit provided powerful ideas on how we can take action to improve well-being in law.

**May’s Well-Being in Law Week** provided yet another opportunity for the CBA to showcase tools that can help us on our well-being journey. Attorneys had the opportunity to participate in various

activities aimed at promoting a healthier lifestyle, such as meditation, chi gong, and nutrition seminars. For those who may be struggling, David Williams, executive director of Connecticut’s Lawyers Concerned for Lawyers provided invaluable information on resources for attorneys in need of help.<sup>4</sup> Attendees were also reminded that well-being is not only for individuals; well-being is needed in the workplace and there are significant benefits for having a healthy organization—better work product, higher retention, and greater teamwork, to name a few. For individuals, a healthier, more balanced lifestyle can lead to improved concentration, better decision-making, and increased efficiency at work. Attorneys who prioritize their well-being may find they can accomplish more in less time and with less stress. A focus on well-being can improve communication and interpersonal skills, leading to stronger relationships with colleagues and clients helping to boost morale and job satisfaction. Success can be possible, not in spite of self-care, but because of it.

**I am buoyed by the strides being made** in the legal community in the well-being arena and am hopeful that CBA events such as the Well-Being Summit and programming for Well-Being Week in Law inspire lawyers across Connecticut to exercise self-care not just at these events but on a continual basis. It can be as simple as taking a few minutes each day to disconnect from the world, going for a walk, or even just taking a power nap. Setting boundaries, taking breaks, developing meaningful relationships, and engaging in activities beyond our jobs that bring us joy and fulfillment is vital to improving the overall health of lawyers and the legal community as a whole. Focusing on well-being can have a profound impact on an attorney’s life, both professionally and personally. By taking care of ourselves, we can show up with clearer minds and greater energy. We can do better because we are better. We can show up as the best version of ourselves, for our family, for our clients, for our colleagues, and for ourselves. And isn’t that the true meaning of success? Not to be the best litigator, to close the biggest

deals, or have the most clients, but to be and live our best lives.

**I hope dear reader** that you had the opportunity to participate in the CBA well-being events we have had this year. If you have not or if you want more ways to help move you along on your own well-being journey, please consider reaching out and joining the CBA Well-Being Committee. Throughout the year, we will be engaging in community walks, holding book club sessions, crafting meditations, and inviting members to share their well-being experiences and learnings. The CBA Well-Being Committee is committed to helping lawyers on their well-being path. It is our hope that by hosting well-being events, we can remind our community that we are not alone in our struggles or in our desire to thrive and that there are resources available to us as we seek to overcome our struggles and thrive. I hope that you join us in this movement—by doing so we can come together and take steps to improve not only our own well-being but those of our legal brothers and sisters. ■



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## NOTES

- 1 Kathleen Parker, “Want to be happy? Then don’t be a lawyer,” *The Washington Post*, January 20, 2023, [www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/2023/01/20/jobs-happiness-lawyers-nature](https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/2023/01/20/jobs-happiness-lawyers-nature/).
- 2 Debra Cassens Weiss, “About one-fifth of lawyers and staffers considered suicide at some point in their careers, new survey says,” *ABA Journal*, May 10, 2022, [www.abajournal.com/news/article/19-of-surveyed-lawyers-and-staffers-said-they-considered-suicide-at-some-point-in-careers](https://www.abajournal.com/news/article/19-of-surveyed-lawyers-and-staffers-said-they-considered-suicide-at-some-point-in-careers).
- 3 Michael S. Webb, “Dissenting from Death: Preventing Lawyer Suicide,” *American Bar Association*, November 24, 2021, [www.americanbar.org/groups/senior\\_lawyers/publications/voice\\_of\\_experience/2021voice-of-experience-november-2021/dissenting-from-death-preventing-lawyer-suicide](https://www.americanbar.org/groups/senior_lawyers/publications/voice_of_experience/2021voice-of-experience-november-2021/dissenting-from-death-preventing-lawyer-suicide).
- 4 <https://lclct.org>