

## Health and Wellness Embraced Well Before COVID, but Firms Have Bolstered Offerings



By Ioana Good

The issue of mental health and wellness has long been a chief subject in the legal industry. Given the world around us and the current stresses we all face, this vital topic has become even more critical. Law firms are seeing an increased awareness focused on a wide range of subjects for well-being and mental health, including social, physical, mental, and more through advocacy, research, education, technical, and resource support.

Before the pandemic, the American Bar Association set out to create a wellness and mental health program, and asked law firms and those in the legal industry to commit to combating mental health issues and substance abuse together. The Institute for Well-Being in Law (IWIL) was formed two years ago to carry on the movement launched by the National Task Force Group. IWIL is dedicated to improving the lives of those in the legal profession by providing resources and support for stakeholders and partners. In a recent survey, they found that many in the legal field struggle with mental health and alcohol disorders. Over 35% of their respondents said they have issues with alcohol, and 28% reported mild or higher depression. Suicide in the legal industry was ranked #8 in a study of suicides by occupation. This is 1.33 times the national norm.

Law firms across the country are now able to sign the ABA Well-Being Pledge and offer resources and confidentiality to help lawyers with substance-use disorders and mental health issues. IWIL also developed the Well-Being Toolkit for Lawyers and Legal Employers. IWIL identifies six dimensions in

people's lives that they need to pay attention to: emotional, intellectual, occupational, physical, spiritual, and social. The organization offers a framework and guidelines for law firms to follow. The program also encourages open firm-wide discussions regarding wellness.

One law firm that took this pledge is Dykema, with 13 offices across the country and 750 personnel. The firm established a Wellness Advisory Group (WAG) comprised of employees throughout the firm to develop a robust wellness program. WAG follows a checklist for well-being programming provided by the ABA, offers educational sessions, updates employees on the offerings of their healthcare provider, Blue Cross, including in-person and virtual counseling, distributes literature and other resources.

As the firm's Chief Human Resources Officer and WAG chair, Ayanna Clinton works with the group to offer unique programming to Dykema's employees. "There's been a lot of stress this past year, and some of our employees have had a hard time during the pandemic," says Clinton. "We want to make sure we get everyone moving and engaged in leading healthier lives. We want to be there for them and walk this path toward greater self-care together."

This year, the firm also hosted a remote webinar titled "Mental Health and Well-being in the Age of Coronavirus and Beyond," presented by Patrick Krill, principal and founder of Krill Strategies, an organization dedicated to mental health and well-being whose goal is to reduce the prevalence and impact of mental health and substance abuse problems in the legal profession and improve the personal well-being of its members.

"We had over 250 people attend, which is amazing!" said Clinton. "I don't think we've ever had that many people attend an optional virtual program. We see a growing need." The program provided coping strategies for people who are struggling with emotional withdrawals or social isolation. "The program helped everyone renew, restart and focus on each new day."

For Lawyer Wellness Week and Mental Health Awareness Month, the firm is providing a virtual program called "Cultivating Resilience" by Sarah Schneider Hong, LMSW, who is a seasoned behavioral health educator, psychotherapist, and licensed clinical social worker. The firm will also share daily posts with different wellness topics each day and will host an event called "Reconnecting with Nature Walk" to encourage remote workers to get out and spend time outdoors. The goal here is to connect with nature as part of a normal lifestyle.

Ball Janik LLP is a law firm that is laser-focused on this topic from its coast-to-coast offices in Oregon and Florida. Heather Oden, the firm's Chief Operating Officer, says, "Our employees are everything. While we can't all be together, we want to ensure that anyone who is struggling in any way can lean on us."

Knowing that stress is dangerously high, the firm has increased its healthcare coverage to offer employees counseling on-demand with a licensed psychologist, psychiatrist, clinical social worker, or naturopaths. The firm encourages employees to get outside and get moving and offers employees discounts for everything from gym memberships and massage services to family entertainment. Employees can purchase various wearable devices, acupuncture services, chiropractic services, and more at a discounted rate.

For Lawyer Wellness Week held on May 3-7, 2021, the firm's marketing team is working to coordinate the delivery of dinner to its attorneys. "We want to ensure that our attorneys know that we are all in this together and management of stress and well-being is good for the entire firm," said Camron Wilde, who oversees the firm's branding and technology efforts. Every day during the week, the firm will share

messages, resources and provide small gifts to the workforce. These gestures help reinforce the commitment to stress management and wellness that the firm has so strongly embraced.

“It is so important for everyone at Ball Janik to know that our health and wellness are not only important for each of us individually but make us stronger as a collective and a company,” said Elle Walch, who oversees the firm’s marketing and business development efforts.

“We are doing a good amount during wellness week, but we want everyone at the firm to know that this is a year-round effort, and the firm has resources for any who need them. We’re committed to providing everyone at Ball Janik with as many tools as we can to combat stress and maintain both physical and mental well-being,” said Heather Oden, the firm’s Chief Operating Officer.

The IWIL has outlined a Monday – Friday schedule for law firms to follow during Lawyer Wellness Week this year. On Monday, for instance, the organization has dedicated the day to “Stay Strong for Well-Being Day,” where those in the legal space are encouraged to eat well, get enough sleep, recover from stress, minimize addictive substances and seek help when needed. On Tuesday, the organization has dedicated the day to “Align Spiritual Well Being,” where those individuals can foster a sense of meaning and purpose in all aspects of life. They are encouraged to align life and work to serve values. To learn more, visit <https://lawyerwellbeing.net/lawyer-well-being-week>.

The legal industry continues to remain committed to health and wellness. Statistics have shown that those in the legal profession are at an increased risk of suicide and substance abuse, and law firms all over the world recognize the need to address these issues with strong internal communication and resources. The Institute for Well-Being in Law is there to partner and provide guidance and tools to help. All of us can help drive the physical and mental health of the industry in the right direction through continued communication and commitment to health and wellness in the legal sector. In the meantime, take care of yourself and enjoy #WellbeingWeekInLaw.

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