**Healthy Lawyers are Better Lawyers**

By Judge Todd W. Bjerke, Circuit Court Judge, La Crosse County

May is Mental Health Awareness Month. As a judge, I see first-hand how mental issues can negatively impact an individual’s life if they don’t get the support they need. Lawyers are no different. Sometimes lawyers need help, and healthy lawyers are better lawyers.

That’s why the State Bar of Wisconsin, in collaboration with the Wisconsin Supreme Court, is committed to improving the health and well-being of the state’s lawyers.

**Task Force Studies Lawyer Well-being**

I recently chaired a task force to examine lawyer well-being in Wisconsin. We studied the issues, reviewed the obstacles, and made recommendations to ensure our legal community is on the right path.

I worked with scores of legal professionals with diverse backgrounds to analyze what we would like to see changed in Wisconsin’s legal culture to achieve better well-being amongst our peers.

The task force members discussed emotional health, occupational pursuits, creative or intellectual endeavors, sense of spirituality or greater purpose in life, physical health, and social connections with others.

People with poor “well-being” will likely allow stress, frustration, general anxieties or fears, or vicarious trauma associated with their jobs to go unaddressed.

As a result, they may be less productive in their work, resort to the use of substances, suffer diminished mental health, mismanage client funds or take unacceptable risks, perhaps be less civil toward others, and then find themselves in trouble.

In addition to work-related stressors, lawyers should be addressing any other issues that affect them, such as adverse childhood or adult experiences, trauma-induced disorders, substance use disorders, or any number of other concerns.

This is the 73rd year in which May has been designated as Mental Health Awareness month. But the main problem, which has not yet been overcome, is the stigma associated with mental health.

**We must be Proactive**

While the idea of addressing mental health has improved over the last decade, there are still too many people who are either unaware that they need to seek help or who are unwilling to do so.

Our Wisconsin law schools have been working with students to develop and maintain good personal well-being before starting their careers. And our judiciary receives training to identify the often unseen or unknown affects of crisis or trauma on people involved in the judicial system.

People are becoming more understanding of mental health issues, and with more education on the complex nuances of mental health, perhaps the stigma will eventually abate.

Our task force report has made numerous recommendations to promote better well-being in our legal community, and efforts to implement the recommendations are beginning.

Through this process, Wisconsin’s legal profession can make positive changes toward better addressing, and perhaps avoiding, the causes and consequences of the high rates of addiction and mental health issues in the profession, as well as improve the professional climate overall.

Healthy lawyers make the best advocates, and healthy lawyers can help improve the administration of justice for everyone. Wisconsin’s legal community is committed to this effort.

*Judge Todd W. Bjerke is a judge on the La Crosse County Circuit Court. He is also chair of the Task Force on Wisconsin Lawyer Well-Being, and serves as chair of the State Bar of Wisconsin’s Wisconsin Lawyer Assistance Program Committee.* The State Bar of Wisconsin is the integrated professional association, created by the Wisconsin Supreme Court, for attorneys who hold a Wisconsin law license. With more than 25,000 members, the State Bar aids the courts in improving the administration of justice, provides continuing legal education for its members to help them maintain their expertise, and assists Wisconsin lawyers in carrying out community service initiatives to educate the public about the legal system and the value of lawyers. For more information, visit [www.wisbar.org](http://www.wisbar.org/).