

An Answer to the Call for Judicial Support: Judicial Well-being Collaborative

By Honorable Sandra Engel (ret.), Albuquerque, NM



All of the city's media outlets sat poised in my courtroom, waiting for the decision that would be controversial either way, and the anticipation was palpable. I breathed a long sigh and pronounced my decision. I remember walking off the bench wondering whether any of the media outlets would really get it right in the reporting or would they leave out nuances of the ruling that shored up the essence of the actual ruling.

I was a new judge, only on the bench for a little over a year, and I remembered a more experienced judge telling me that our reputation as judges is made in the first six months to a year. I wondered how my ruling would be perceived. I wanted to reach out to a colleague, or somehow release the tension I was feeling, the nervousness, but I only had time to take a quick break and get right back on the bench for my afternoon docket, with the expectation being that I would show up for my docket calm, decisive and unaffected.

Does this sound familiar to you? Judges often feel the contrast of the external composure with the internal strain. Judges complain of ruminating over their decisions, taking it home with them and feeling unable to leave it on the bench. They also report not feeling like their colleagues have time to bother them with their problems or ask for advice. Judges often suffer in silence, seemingly just trying to figure it out and not look weak or incompetent in the process. The stigma around a judge asking for support is vast.

As judges, we are supposed to be at the top of our game and possess all the answers for the parties in front of us as we make the ultimate decisions impacting their lives. However, the toll that this practice takes on a judge is remarkable and so often goes unnoticed.

We have jobs that are different from those of our friends and families. We sit in a bubble with everyone watching what we do and say 24/7 and giving us real time feedback in sometimes courteous and sometimes disrespectful ways. We constantly

are operating at a high level to execute our duties of remaining fair, impartial and independent. We are not only in charge of controlling the courtroom, litigants and attorneys but also bridled with the task of regulating and controlling ourselves in sometimes less than optimum circumstances.

As a judge, our responsibilities under our codes of judicial conduct and ethics prevent us from discussing our cases with others, and because of this, sometimes we feel as if we are operating on our own island, cut off from others and feeling quite isolated and alone.

We also experience concepts that may be foreign to our friends and family, like decision fatigue, or compassion fatigue. We are given the job of sitting and listening to our communities' problems and seemingly unsolvable dilemmas and are expected to deliver the right solution in each case. Yet, we are not often given any support around our own well-being and seemingly are left to ourselves to come up with answers on how we decide to balance it all, the feelings, the work, and the outside obligations and joys of our life. Oftentimes, we do not have the time or the energy to think proactively on how we could make changes to improve the way we do things, as we are constantly in reactive mode, what we often call "putting out the fires".

The American Bar Association published the results of a survey entitled "Stress and Resiliency in the U. S. Judiciary" in December of 2020 in the *Journal of the Professional Lawyer* in December of 2020¹. One of the number one stressors discovered by the survey was the importance and impact of decisions. Heavy dockets, long hours of work, and isolation were in the top 10. The U.S. Dept of Labor's Occupational Information Network (O*Net) released data on the most stressful jobs in the nation, defining stress as a requirement to accept criticism and deal calmly with high -stress situations². Judges ranked number 4 on this rolling list due to the nature of the work.

Many states are beginning to come up with resources for supporting the well-being of their local judges, but in many jurisdictions, judges are doing it all alone. It does not have to be that way.

While studies indicate that we are in a stressful occupation, and while our judges continue to suffer overwhelm and burnout in their positions, we need to find ways to help those who are on the benches doing the work. Having support as a judicial officer can take many forms. There are helplines, leadership coaching opportunities, and collaboratives where we share ideas and support each other on the bench, and they are created solely to support you in the work that you do.

There are many existing resources but finding them is not always easy. So where do we go for support, for a place to share ideas and combat isolation? We rely on our state's Judges and Lawyer's Assistance Program (LAP) for some resources, and reach out to our colleagues when we can, but what else can we do?

In expanding its long-standing judicial Wellness-Connection-Leadership initiative, the National Council of Juvenile and Family Court Judges (NCJFCJ) has welcomed a new group of professionals called the Judicial Well-being Collaborative (JWC) that serves as a landing place for states to attend meetings and find out more about how they can support their own judges and network with others who are dedicated to doing the same.

We aim to bring together representatives from every state, encompassing judges from all areas of the court system and practice areas. The diverse assembly is united by a common mission: to provide support to those that are working in the space of providing resources and ideas to judges nationwide, and to better serve the judiciary. This innovative and vital collaboration aims to enhance mental health and well-being support systems for judges across all the United States. Together, we believe that as a judge, you no longer have to be alone.

“Our judiciary is the cornerstone of our democracy, and their well-being is paramount to the fair administration of justice,” Joey Orduna Hastings, CEO of the NCJFCJ. “By partnering with the JWC, we aim to ensure that judges have access to the support and resources they need to navigate the pressure of their roles effectively.”

The members of the JWC are made up of a group of judges, LAP directors, judicial well-being committee members and other professionals who are interested in supporting judicial well-being in their state. The JWC has a multi-state membership made up of over 14 states and growing. The need and desire for helping judges do their jobs even better and providing the support and safety needed to keep our talented jurists is palpable today and JWC aims to answer the call.

In addition to the already existing wellness initiative, the JWC will focus on these key initiatives for NCJFCJ members and non-members:

- ◆ Providing a place for wellness professionals in the judiciary to co-create and collaborate for better outcomes in their own states; and
- ◆ Developing and disseminating wellness resources tailored specifically for judicial professionals, including a well-being speakers bureau for conferences and courts; and
- ◆ Promoting best practices in judicial well-being for all judges in all states.

Please reach out to **Judge Sandra Engel (ret.)** from the JWC at sanjnm@gmail.com if your jurisdiction is looking for speakers for conferences or meetings regarding well-being in the judiciary or if you want to find out more about the JWC. ■

Judge Sandra Engel, (ret.) served on the bench in Bernalillo County Metropolitan Court for over 16 years and served as Presiding Judge and Chief Judge for her court. She still sits in senior status on her bench. She now serves as the Judicial Wellness Program Manager for the State Bar of New Mexico and is the Director of the Judicial Coaching Resource, which is a peer-to-peer coaching platform for all New Mexico judges. She owns High Road to Success Coaching, and provides leadership coaching to judges, attorneys and business leaders nationwide.



Endnotes

¹ ABA Commission on Lawyer's Assistance Programs, "Stress and Resiliency in the U.S. Judiciary. Dec. 2020, <https://www.americanbar.org/news/abanews/aba-news-archives/2020/12/aba-releases-comprehensive-surveyreport-revealing-key-drivers-o/>

² Nat'l Center for O*NET Dev., O*NET OnLine, U.S. Dep't of Labor, Emp't & Training Admin., <https://www.onetonline.org/> (last visited Nov. 12, 2025). <https://www.onetonline.org/find/descriptor/result/1.C.4.b>