

## Welcome to the Legal Profession

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elcome to membership in  
the North Carolina State  
Bar. The Bar has one over-  
riding concern, that is to

assure the delivery of competent professional legal services to the people and businesses of this state.

It does not take but a moment's reflection to see that you probably have a congruent goal—to prac-

tice law competently and professionally in service to your clients. To achieve this mutual goal the Bar

asks certain things of you like getting the minimum hours of CLE and offers you certain assistance

such as guidance on ethical questions. The Bar's programs are not extras but reflect the collective wis-

dom of those who have guided the profession over many years as to what is necessary for a lawyer to

practice competently. Your only mistake will be failure to take advantage of what the Bar's programs,

and particularly the Bar's Lawyers Assistance Program, have to offer you.

The Lawyer Assistance Program ("LAP") provides *confidential* assistance to lawyers with substance abuse problems, and to

lawyers with depression and other mental health issues. The Lawyer Assistance Program began back in 1979 when it

was known as the PALS Program, and has continued since that time to meet a growing need.

All of the legal education and expertise in the world are of little account if a lawyer is suffering from alcoholism or other drug addictions. In the LAP's over 25 years of working with lawyers it has distilled the best thinking out there on what to do about the fact that as many as one out of every five lawyers, at some time during his or her years of practice, will have a problem with chemical addiction. You, an associate or partner of yours, or one of your best lawyer friends, will probably have a chemical addiction problem. The LAP can help educate you about the risks and what you can do to help yourself or another lawyer confronted with chemical addiction.

There is no perfect picture of the alcoholic lawyer. Typically he or she graduated in the top one-third of their class, is a high achiever, and has a strong commitment to make his or her mark on our profession. Younger lawyers, who find themselves in trouble with chemical addiction early in their careers, usually have had a history of abusive alcohol use. They have used abusively either: a) during college and/or law school, b) as a means to deal with the ups and downs brought on by emotional stress, or c) had a doctor prescribe some tranquilizer to help them through a stressful period (e.g. exams, death in the family,

etc.). They have used this tranquilizer (which may stay in the body for months) along with moderate amounts of alcohol, and have experienced the rapid onset of an addictive disease.

The Bar expanded the outreach of the LAP in 1999 to meet the growing need for assistance among members of our profession suffering from depression and other types of mental conditions. Depression is an illness that can be incapacitating and can come on so gradually that a lawyer is unaware how much his/her moods, habits, and lifestyle have been affected.

Depression is also a highly treatable disease. But many people, particularly lawyers, do not get treatment, because asking for help runs counter to the ingrained training we receive as lawyers that we are supposed to help others and not need help ourselves. Depression is more likely to strike young lawyers, particularly during the stressful period of their lives when they are trying to establish themselves in the profession. A significant number of people who have serious depression, and do not receive help, will commit suicide.

Often a lawyer will get depressed and try to self-medicate depression with alcohol. Alcohol is a central nervous system depressant. The worse you feel, the more you use the alcohol, the more of which you drink, the worse you feel the next day. A vicious cycle has begun. So whether the problem is depression, alco-

hol, or just needing to understand if there is a problem, the Bar's Lawyer Assistance Program is your resource to get assistance.

Pursuant to Rule 1.6 of the Rules of Professional Conduct, all communications with the Lawyer Assistance Program are privileged within the *confidentiality* of the attorney-client privilege. The Lawyer Assistance Program is totally separate from the disciplinary functions of the State Bar. The Lawyer Assistance Program works because it is an opportunity for a lawyer to get help *confidentially* before the consequences of addiction or depression turn into financial or family ruin or ethical breaches.

The Lawyer Assistance Program has two committees of volunteers who reach out and provide support to other lawyers. The PALS Committee is comprised of lawyers with personal experience or education with alcoholism or other chemical addictions. The FRIENDS Committee is comprised of lawyers with personal experience or education to help lawyers suffering from depression or other mental illnesses. LAP volunteers receive yearly training in confidentiality and how to more readily assist other lawyers in need. Conversations with LAP volunteers are also privileged and *confidential* under Rule 1.6.

Because a great number of crimes and legal problems arise from the context of alcohol abuse or mental illness, knowing something about these problems will

make you a better lawyer. It may also help you know when to get confidential help that might save a colleague's life. Shouldering that responsibility is one of the gratifying aspects of being a member of a learned profession. Again, welcome aboard.

For more information about the Lawyer Assistance Program please contact:

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For more information regarding the Lawyer Assistance Program visit our website at **www.nclap.org**.