

YOU ARE NOT ALONE: WCBA Launches Lawyer Assistance Program (LAP) Committee

By Michelle E. Tarson, Esq. and Alan R. Gray, Jr., Esq.



"My name is Alan, and I'm an alcoholic."

That is how I have begun my contributions to a meeting at least once a week for the past almost-seven years. I started doing that on Thursday, August 22, 2019, because the previous evening—my 30th birthday—my partner and two best friends staged an intervention for my drinking. That Thursday, I was hurt, angry, and scared, all to degrees I still cannot fully articulate. Getting sober would be the hardest thing I have ever done, but it also was the best *thing I have ever done. And I owe it all to the New York City Bar Association's Lawyer Assistance Program, whose lawyers AA meeting I attended on my first day of sobriety—and without which I am certain I would not have gotten sober.*

Everyone in the legal profession—not just lawyers and judges, but also law students and faculty, paralegals and assistants, even court officers – faces unique stressors, which require unique support. As part of the WCBA's commitment to the health and wellbeing of the legal profession, it recently formed the WCBA Lawyer Assistance Program Committee ("WCBA LAC").

I. What Is LAP?

Lawyer Assistance Programs ("LAPs") exist not just in New York, but throughout the country. They provide support and services to members of the legal community who need assistance with a wide range of issues, including those involving alcohol, substance use, or mental health.[1]

Too many people in the legal profession, or those hoping to enter it, are unaware of LAPs and the resources they offer. LAPs are for the lawyer who is drinking too much; the law student worried about their bar application; the judge carrying private grief; the paralegal experiencing burnout; and the young associate struggling with anxiety and career pressure.

The NYC Bar Association's Lawyer Assistance Program ("NYCBA LAP") serves members of the legal profession not only in the five boroughs of New York City, but also those in Westchester County. The NYCBA LAP has resources for alcoholism, substance abuse, anxiety, depression, burnout, stress, grief, isolation, gambling, and general wellness. Its free and confidential services are not limited to judges and attorneys! Family members, support staff and law students can also seek help.

Even though the NYCBA LAP reaches Westchester, we need to expand its presence. The WCBA LAC will work with the NYCBA LAP to increase awareness both of issues plaguing the legal community as well as available resources for the legal profession and students at Pace University's Elisabeth Haub School of Law, and to encourage more attorneys to volunteer.

II. The Duties and Benefits of Being a Monitor

Monitoring is one of the most valuable components of a LAP. It is a support and accountability program for those who, because of a mental health or substance use issue, have been disciplined or disbarred by the Appellate Division, had their bar applications deferred or denied, or who fear or anticipate such consequences. Participants in the program are given a course of treatment to

follow, which, depending on the participant's need, may include therapy sessions, 12-step self-help recovery meetings, or random drug or alcohol testing. The participant is overseen by a *monito*—a volunteer attorney—who ensures that the participant completes the program as prescribed. The monitor is also a front-line resource for the participant to address any issues that may arise during treatment. The monitor then reports back to the LAP whether the participant is completing their treatment as prescribed.

The benefits of a LAP monitoring program are manifold: participants have an accountability system in place to help maintain their compliance; disciplining authorities (a Character & Fitness Committee, a Grievance Committee, or a court) have reliable records of participants' progress; and volunteer monitors can re-invest their stability to help ground not only their assigned participants, but our community and profession as a whole. Monitors do not make any determination or recommendation regarding an attorney's or student's fitness to practice law, nor do the WCBA LAC or NYCBA LAP.[2]

Neither WCBA nor NYCBA membership is required to be a monitor or to take monitor training.

III. Communications Are Confidential

One of the biggest barriers to mental health treatment in the legal profession is the fear of stigma—the worry that things said to a LAP will somehow 'get out,' ultimately harming that person's reputation and ability to advance or succeed in the profession. But LAPs take participants' confidentiality *very* seriously:

> The confidential relations and communications between . . . a lawyer assistance committee sponsored by a state or local bar association and any person, firm or corporation communicating with such committee . . . shall be deemed to be privileged on the same basis as those provided by law between attorney and client. Such privilege may be waived only by the person, firm or corporation which has furnished information to the committee.[3]

Further, the rule that requires attorneys to report professional misconduct does not require disclosure of "information gained by a lawyer or judge while participating in a bona fide lawyer assistance program."[4]

IV. How You Can Help

We encourage all bar associations to inform their members about the WCBA LAC and how they can participate. An informational meeting about NYCBA LAP will be held in September and we aim to provide monitoring training this fall.

Here are some ways you can help:

- Join the WCBA LAC! You do not have to be a member of the WCBA to be a member of its LAC.
- Become a monitor! No prior experience with mental health or substance use issues is required; all the information and resources needed to be a monitor is given during training.
- Invite the WCBA or NYCBA LAPs to give a program in your workplace or at your next affinity bar association meeting! CLE credit can be arranged!
- Share our resources and ideas with others!
- Encourage those in need to reach out for help!

V. If You or Someone You Know Needs Help

- You are not alone. Free confidential help is available 24/7.
- **Call 9-1-1** if you or someone you know is having a medical emergency or is in a life-threatening situation.
- **Call, chat, or text the Suicide & Crisis Lifeline at 9-8-8** if you or someone you know is in crisis or having thoughts of suicide.
- **Contact the NYCBA LAP at 212-302-5787.** NYCBA membership is *not* required. Many services are available by phone or remotely.

To join the WCBA LAC, please contact the WCBA's Executive Director Isabel Barney at isabel@wcbany.org. For assistance or services, please utilize the resources listed above.

Michelle E. Tarson, Esq., is Senior Counsel at Stagg Wabnik Law Group LLP and focuses on commercial litigation. She co-chairs the WCBA LAC, is a monitor for the NYCBA LAP and a Vice President for the Westchester Women's Bar Association.

Alan Gray, Esq., is an appellate court attorney and co-chair of the Wellness Committee at the Supreme Court of the State of New York, Appellate Division, First Department. He also co-chairs the WCBA LAC and actively participates in the NYCBA LAP.

Endnotes

1 *See Commission on Lawyer Assistance Programs*, A.B.A., https://www.americanbar.org/groups/lawyer_assistance/ (last accessed June 21, 2026).

2 All contracts, releases and reports are executed with, submitted to, and overseen by the NYCBA LAP. Those are not handled by the WCBA LAP and monitors do not directly report to a Character & Fitness Committee, Grievance Committee, or a court.

3 N.Y. Jud. Law § 499(1) (McKinney 2026).

4 N.Y. Rules of Pro. Conduct, 22 N.Y.C.R.R. Part 1200, Rule 8.3(c)(2) (2026).