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# JOURNAL

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# You Matter

As lawyers and judges, we specialize in helping people with problems. We mask the fact that we have our own problems. It is okay to ask others if they need help. It is okay to ask for help. Your life matters. You matter.

BY KARLISE Y. GRIER

**“I did not think anyone would care if I was here or not,”** shared Dr. Mark Swancutt, a panelist at the Suicide Awareness Program convened by the Chief Justice’s Commission on Professionalism on April 30. Dr. Swancutt then shared how wrong he was, as evidenced by the outpouring of support he received when he was hospitalized for an illness. His powerful testimony was not unique. Throughout the Suicide Awareness Program, which had as one of its goals making the case that suicide is preventable, we heard many times how people often feel their family, friends and colleagues would be better off without them. We also learned during the program that it is untrue when believe that we don’t matter.

## Your Life Matters. You Matter.

Suicide is a difficult topic, and even more so when it is something that you have personal experience with. A number of the program’s speakers and panelists shared these experiences with those participating as this extremely important dialogue began. Moderator Sally Yates shared the impact that her father’s death had on her life. J. Kelley Quillian, a former judge of



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the Court of Appeals of Georgia, died by suicide in 1986.<sup>1</sup> State Bar Attorney Wellness Committee Chair R. Javoyne Hicks spoke about the challenges she faced as a single parent after her children lost their father, attorney Charles Hicks, to suicide. And it was those unique experiences that played a large part in Hicks' role helping to launch the State Bar's Attorney Wellness Program—Lawyers Living Well.<sup>2</sup>

State Bar Past President Robin Frazer Clark and Hon. Bill Reinhardt highlighted the tremendous professional and personal contributions made by some of our colleagues who died by suicide, including 2004-05 State Bar President Rob Reinhardt. Their lives mattered—as does each of our lives. And because we all matter, one of Clark's initiatives during her year as president was to launch the State Bar of Georgia's Suicide Awareness Prevention Campaign.

Suicide is preventable, and we as a legal community can each play a role in creating an environment that makes it less likely that another colleague will die by suicide. In professionalism parlance, I would say, "To my colleagues in the practice of law, I offer concern for your welfare. I will strive to make our association a professional friendship."<sup>3</sup> As a practical matter, I would offer these suggestions gleaned from the Suicide Awareness Program.

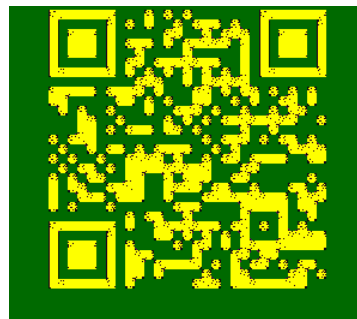
### Be Lovingly Present

Attorney Lynn Garson shared in a paper she wrote for the program:

"Recognizing that depression is a disease of isolation, others can try to spend time with the person or check in by phone if in person is not possible. The calls and visits from my friends propped me up enough to stay alive until I got the help I needed. If I had thought that no one cared, I wouldn't have made it through. If you see any spark of interest or liveliness, do your best to fan the flame. Given the person's low state, it may not work, but

## Chief Justice's Commission on Professionalism Suicide and Awareness Program Resources

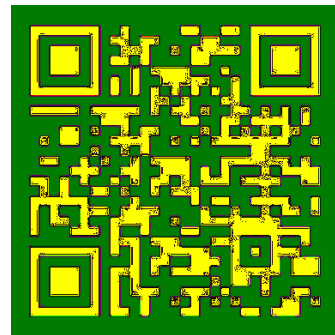
Access all of the resources and materials compiled for the Suicide Awareness Program via the QR Codes below:



SUICIDE AWARENESS PROGRAM



SUICIDE AWARENESS PROGRAM RESOURCES



STATE BAR OF GEORGIA  
LAWYERS LIVING WELL

if it does, you will have gained some ground. If the person wants to talk, listen. Don't listen so that you can respond and fix it (which you can't and will make you both miserable). Listen to be present to that person's distress. Don't hide from it, don't dramatize it and don't inject your own pain or experience into the conversation unless invited. Just be lovingly present."<sup>4</sup>

**Colleagues, friends and family don't have to have a solution, just have referral numbers in your phone.**

While we as lawyers and judges may be hard-wired to solve problems, being present for colleagues, friends or family who may need help doesn't mean we are the ones who are best equipped to provide that help. Rachael Holloman, suicide preven-

tion director for the Georgia Department of Behavioral Health and Developmental Disabilities, made this clear when she discussed the QPR program. QPR stands for Question, Persuade and Refer, three steps anyone can learn to help prevent suicide. Just like CPR, QPR is an emergency response to someone in crisis and can save lives. Asking someone about the presence of suicidal thoughts and feelings opens up a conversation that may lead to a referral for help. There are numerous resources available to help those in crisis (both lawyers and non-lawyers) including the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline by phone at 1-800-273-TALK (8255) or by chat at [suicidepreventionlifeline.org/chat/](http://suicidepreventionlifeline.org/chat/).<sup>5</sup> Holloman reminded the audience that everyone can do this one thing—put the referral numbers for resources discussed during the program into their phones.

### **If You Have Suicidal Thoughts, Ask for Help**

Attorney Eric Lang stressed self-awareness in his panelist remarks. He shared that before getting the appropriate treatment, he believed that most people regularly thought about death by suicide.

He did not initially understand that this condition warranted treatment; that it was treatable.

Other people may not always recognize that they need help. Psychiatrist and program panelist Dr. Ben Hunter, medical director of outpatient services at Skyland Trail in Atlanta, recommended that if an individual regularly thinks about death by suicide, or if an individual has a family history of depression or death by suicide, that person should seek professional counseling. In Georgia, one place to begin—just to talk to someone and start a conversation—is the Georgia Crisis and Access Line (GCAL), 1-800-715-4225. GCAL is available 24/7 to both lawyers and non-lawyers. Reading the article “Help Is Out There” by Lynn Garson and “Choosing A Therapist” by Plamen Russev is also a good first step.<sup>6</sup>

### **Employee Assistance Programs, #UseYour6 and a Helpline for Judges Can Help Save Lives**

Judge Wes Tailor shared the challenges he experienced as an attorney after being in New York City and near ground zero when the World Trade Center collapsed.

He received help from the Employee Assistance Program of his then-employer—a large Atlanta law firm. Tailor also shared that he has taken advantage of the State Bar of Georgia’s #UseYour6 sessions.<sup>7</sup> All Georgia lawyers have access to six free counseling sessions each year through the State Bar of Georgia’s Lawyer Assistance Program.

Joe Chancey, the Managing Partner at Drew Eckl & Farnham LLP and a member of the Planning Team for the Suicide Awareness Program, contributed a paper entitled “Talking To Employees About Mental Health—Can I? Should I? Must I? Navigating The Medical Privacy Maze In Georgia,” to assist law firms in navigating the legal issues related to supporting the mental health of attorneys.<sup>8</sup> Another Drew Eckl Partner, Taylor S. Poncz, also shared her experiences after losing a colleague to death by suicide in “Attorney Mental Health & Wellness—A Personal Essay on Why I Believe We Have an Ethical Obligation to Act on it in the Workplace.”<sup>9</sup>

Judge Shondeana Crews Morris, another member of the Suicide Awareness Planning Team, responded to a question about resources solely for judges.

## **ACKNOWLEDGMENTS**

The planning team for the Suicide Awareness Program, with staff support from the Commission and the program co-sponsors, began working on the program in May 2019, after learning of the death by suicide of an associate at Drew Eckl Farnham, LLP. The Commission is grateful to everyone who contributed in any manner to the Suicide Awareness Program.

### **PLANNING TEAM MEMBERS**

#### **SOLACE Committee Co-Chair**

Hon. Clyde L. Reese III, Court of Appeals of Georgia

#### **SOLACE Committee Co-Chair**

Hon. Render M. Heard, Tifton Circuit Juvenile Court

#### **Suicide Prevention Committee Program Chair**

Hon. Shondeana Crews Morris, DeKalb County Superior Court

Partner Joe Chancey, Drew Eckl Farnham<sup>13</sup>

### **PROGRAM CO-SPONSORS**

Georgia Department of Behavioral Health and Developmental Disabilities

Judicial Council of Georgia/Administrative Office of the Courts

State Bar of Georgia Attorney Wellness Committee

State Bar of Georgia Suicide Awareness and Prevention Committee

### **SPECIAL RECOGNITION**

The Suicide Awareness Program took place under the leadership of then-Chief Justice Harold D. Melton in his role as Commission chair. We thank him for his work in bring this program to light.

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Need help but don't know where to start? Contact the Georgia Crisis and Access Line (GCAL) at 800-715-4225 and begin a conversation. GCAL is available 24/7 to both lawyers and non-lawyers.

She told the audience that the American Bar Association has a National Helpline for Judges Helping Judges available at 1-800-219-6474.<sup>10</sup>

### Take Care of Yourself and One Another

Dr. Alex Crosby, senior medical advisor, Division of Injury Prevention for the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, closed by reiterating that death by suicide is preventable and that we as a community of professionals each have a role to play in prevention. Not everyone can perform the same role, but we can all do something, including checking on others and taking care of ourselves. Dr. Crosby shared a variety of ways that individuals can consider when determining how they can best help to prevent death by suicide.<sup>11</sup> Hicks then reminded the audience that we don't have to wait until we feel like we are in crisis to get help. She encouraged everyone to be proactive in taking care of themselves before sharing the many ways that the State Bar of Georgia Attorney Wellness Committee is helping lawyers to live well.<sup>12</sup>

### Available Resources

The Commission compiled numerous resources to help you help yourself and others. The resources highlighted in this article are only some of the information that you can find as our legal community works to prevent death by suicide. Use the QR Codes on page 83 to access all of the resources and materials compiled for the Suicide Awareness Program, or visit [cjcpga.org/suicide-awareness-program/](http://cjcpga.org/suicide-awareness-program/).

As lawyers and judges, we specialize in helping people with problems. Lawyers help craft creative solutions to assist people in solving their problems. Judges make decisions—sometimes life and death—that resolve the problems of those in conflict. We mask the fact that we have our own problems. We sometimes don't know how to check in on others we may be worried about. It is okay to ask others if they need help. It is okay to ask for help.

Your life matters. You matter. ●



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### Endnotes

1. You can read more about Yates' experience with her father's battle with depression at: <https://www.cnn.com/2018/06/11/opinions/when-my-dad-lost-his-struggle-with-depression-sally-yates>.
2. Learn more about Lawyers Living Well at <https://www.gabar.org/wellness/>.
3. See *A Lawyer's Creed: an Aspirational Statement on Professionalism* at: <http://cjcpga.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/07/2-Lawyers-CreedAspStatement-v-2013-Line-Number-with-new-logo-and-seal-v07-25-19.pdf>.
4. You may read the complete essay by Lynn Garson, *Everything I Know About Suicide*, at the link here: <http://cjcpga.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/04/Updated-v-04-27-21-Everything-I-Know-about-Suicide-4813-4438-5509-v.3.pdf>
5. A resource page from the Suicide Awareness Program is available at the link here: <http://cjcpga.org/suicide-awareness-program-resources-qr-code-page/>.
6. See <http://cjcpga.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/04/Help-Is-Out-There-by-Lynn-Garson.pdf>.
7. #UseYour6 is the informal name for the State Bar of Georgia's Lawyer Assistance Program. For more information, visit <https://www.gabar.org/wellness/upload/Use-Your-6.pdf>.
8. See <http://cjcpga.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/04/Drew-Eckl-Farnham-from-Joe-Chancey-Suicide-Awareness-Employee-Privacy-Branded.pdf>.
9. See <http://cjcpga.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/04/DRI-For-Life-Article-Mental-Health-and-Awareness-Branded.pdf>.
10. See also [https://www.americanbar.org/groups/lawyer\\_assistance/articles\\_and\\_info/resources\\_for\\_judges/](https://www.americanbar.org/groups/lawyer_assistance/articles_and_info/resources_for_judges/)
11. See <http://cjcpga.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/07/Alex-Crosby-06-28-21-Cleared-Slides-StateBarGeorMentHlthPromo-June2021shrtA.pdf>.
12. See Note 2, supra.
13. Staff support was provided by Karlise Y. Grier, executive director, Chief Justice's Commission on Professionalism and Layne Bridges (State Bar of Georgia South Georgia Office, on behalf of the State Bar of Georgia SOLACE Program). Previous staff support was provided by Bonne Cella. The Administrative Office of the Courts, under the leadership of Cynthia Clanton, provided assistance with webinar logistics and support, provided by Michelle Barclay, Noelle Lagueux-Alvarez, Bruce Shaw and Latoinna Lawrence. Amber Rikard provided graphic design support on behalf of the State Bar of Georgia's Attorney Wellness Committee.