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WORKING WELL

A Conversation on Attorney Wellness with Acting AOC Director Judge Blee

By Jeralyn L. Lawrence

NJSBA Past President

EDITOR'S NOTE: The following article is adapted from a discussion hosted by the New Jersey State Bar Association's Lawyer Well-being Committee, where Acting Administrative Director of the Courts Judge Michael J. Blee joined Maritza Rodriguez, Linda Mainenti Walsh and the author to talk about the state of attorney wellness and the judiciary's role in creating a healthier profession.

The legal profession is confronting an uncomfortable truth: it is in crisis. Long hours, unrelenting pressure, and a culture that rewards exhaustion have left many lawyers emotionally drained—and New Jersey is leading a growing movement to change that.

The message from a recent NJSBA Lawyer Well-being Committee panel with Acting Administrative Director of the Courts Judge Michael J. Blee was clear—the status quo is unsustainable.

A Profession on the Brink

Among the alarming numbers from the 2023 NJSBA Putting Lawyers First Task Force Report shared during the program:

Nearly half of the 1,637 New Jersey attorneys surveyed reported burnout, more than two-thirds said they experience anxiety, and over half reported alcohol misuse. Ten percent (164 lawyers) admitted to having suicidal thoughts.

The report identified the roots of the problem: an “always on” culture that demands 24/7 availability, economic pressures, adversarial work environments, and the stigma that prevents lawyers from seeking help. The profession continues to glorify busyness instead of balance and exhaustion instead of sustainability. That mindset is making lawyers sick. The question is no longer whether a wellness problem exists. The question is what the profession is willing to do about it.

The Judiciary Steps In

For Judge Blee, who began his career as a solo practitioner before joining the bench, the issue is both professional and personal.

“At every stop, I talk about wellness because the survey also showed that not only are our lawyers suffering but we as judges, who are lawyers, are also suffering,” Judge Blee said.

Since his appointment as Acting Administrative Director in April 2025, Judge Blee has made wellness a focal point of his leadership. “We can't care for others if we can't care for ourselves first. So we need to be right to make other people right. We need to come together to try to help each other, to see if somebody's struggling, try to get them help.”

Judge Blee outlined a series of initiatives that reflect a more collaborative approach between the bench and the bar.

Real Reforms, Measurable Progress

1. Anonymous Referrals to NJLAP

The judiciary now authorizes court personnel, attorneys, and judges to make confidential referrals to the New Jersey Lawyers Assistance Program (NJLAP). Colleagues who notice troubling behavior can refer someone for support without breaching privacy.

“The third-party referral—you make the call, you can keep it anonymous. You provide the individual's name, a little bit of background, and away it goes. Understand, though, that's the last contact you'll have, because what we've heard from our committees and the surveys is that the lawyers are really concerned about confidentiality, again, because of the stigma,” Judge Blee said.

2. Mental Health and Bar Admission Reform

One of the most celebrated changes is the reform of Question 12B on the Character and Fitness application, which is part of the bar application, that formerly asked applicants about mental health conditions.

The Task Force noted that question had a chilling effect, with

law students reporting they were afraid to seek therapy because they knew they'd have to disclose it later. With input from the bar, the judiciary rewrote the question to focus on conduct rather than diagnosis—a small but significant step toward ending stigma.

3. Succession Planning for Solos

As a former solo practitioner, Judge Blee knows firsthand how important planning can be. “Starting September 25th, attorneys in private practice will respond to questions about succession planning status and annual registration.”

The judiciary’s collaborative approach drew praise during the discussion. Succession planning emerged as a recommendation of the Supreme Court Wellbeing Committee, following significant discussion about whether such planning should be mandatory. Ultimately, the court was receptive to concerns raised by the bar and chose not to make the requirement mandatory.

4. Normalizing the Wellness Conversation

For the first time, every assignment judge in New Jersey now addresses wellness during annual State of the Judiciary meetings—a simple but powerful change Judge Blee initiated.

During the discussion it was highlighted from a lawyer’s perspective, hearing an assignment judge openly discuss attorney wellness represented a feeling of arrival and a powerful moment—one that signaled a meaningful cultural shift within the profession.

Courthouses have also begun hosting wellness-focused activities—from CLEs and mindfulness sessions to acupuncture pop-ups—and providing information about confidential support programs.

5. Reducing Barriers to Getting Help

The Supreme Court’s Wellness Committee, which includes Judge Blee, is reviewing the \$2,000 inactive status fee for attorneys who take leave due to disability or mental health needs.

“You wonder why an attorney who is struggling, who has to make a difficult decision that could affect his or her family, by going on disability inactive status, needs to pay \$2,000. So we’re working on that,” Judge Blee said.

A Healthier Future for the Profession

As the discussion came to a close, Judge Blee reflected on the shared responsibility to prioritize well-being.

“I just want to say how grateful I am, one, for everybody on the screen, two, for some of us that are on the tail ends of our career to be open to these concepts—to want to help our brothers and sisters in this profession,” Judge Blee said.

The message was unmistakable: **wellness is no longer optional**. It is a professional duty—one that requires empathy, awareness, and systemic reform. Wellness isn’t a trend. It’s the founda-

tion of a sustainable profession. By putting lawyers first, the entire justice system is strengthened.

New Jersey’s judiciary and bar are modeling what that change looks like: collaboration over criticism, progress over perfection, and a collective commitment to ensuring that those who serve justice can do so without losing themselves in the process.

Visit njcourts.gov/attorneys/registration-compliance/supreme-court-committee-wellness-law for more information and resources. ■

Jeralyn L. Lawrence of Lawrence Law is the founder of the Putting Lawyers First Task Force. She serves on the New Jersey Supreme Court’s Committee on Wellness in the Law. Jeralyn offers her deepest gratitude to Judge Blee for his unwavering commitment to wellness and for his exceptional efforts for addressing these critical issues.

LEGAL SERVICES CORPORATION

Notice of Grant Funds Available for Calendar Year 2027

The Legal Services Corporation (LSC) announces the availability of grant funds to provide civil legal services to eligible clients during calendar year 2027. In accordance with LSC’s multiyear funding policy, grants are available for only specified service areas. The list of service areas (and their descriptions) where grant opportunities are open are available at <https://www.lsc.gov/grants/basic-field-grant/lsc-service-areas/2027-service-areas-subject-competition>. The Request for Proposals (RFP), which includes instructions for preparing the grant proposal, will be published at <https://www.lsc.gov/grants-grantee-resources/our-grant-programs/basic-field-grant> on or around April 13, 2026. Applicants must file a Pre-Application and the grant application through GrantEase: LSC’s grants management system.

Please visit <https://www.lsc.gov/grants/basic-field-grant> for filing dates, applicant eligibility, submission requirements, and updates regarding the LSC grants process. Please email inquiries pertaining to the LSC grants process to LSCGrants@lsc.gov.