



Meet the Alabama Lawyer Assistance Program

By Robert B. Thornhill

As the director of the Alabama Lawyer Assistance Program,

I see or hear about attorneys almost every day who are struggling with undiagnosed and/or untreated mental health issues such as alcoholism, drug addiction, depression or anxiety. These maladies always result in inevitably worsening negative consequences over time without treatment and recovery. The negative

consequences include the utter devastation of relationships, warped lives of blameless children, lost productivity at work, eventual loss of employment, formal complaints to the Alabama State Bar, malpractice claims, the decline of physical health, cognitive impairment, loss of personal integrity and eventually despair, hopelessness and death.

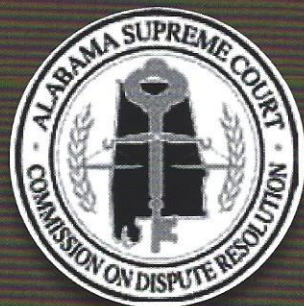
I also get to see miracles unfolding on a daily basis. I get to witness people who have emerged from a seemingly hopeless state of

existence to a genuine path of recovery and rebirth. We do live in an age of miracles! It is indescribably wonderful to watch this process unfold, to see families reunited, careers salvaged and often greatly improved, to watch mental, emotional, spiritual and physical health improve and to see joy in the faces of small children who look up to their parents for affirmation and a sense of value.

This edition of *The Alabama Lawyer* is dedicated to the attorneys, law students and judges who need our assistance, and to those who have found the path to recovery and wellness. It is also intended for colleagues, family members and loved ones who often see this process of self-destruction and do not know what to do. It contains numerous articles on the topics of addiction, depression, stress, mental health, treatment and recovery. I am so grateful for the many people who have taken the time and effort to contribute to this edition and to demonstrate their willingness to be of service.

My work with the Alabama Lawyer Assistance Program, and the experience of the dedicated and passionate attorneys who serve on our committee, is very rarely “normal” or “even-keeled.” We expect to be faced with scenarios and situations that often seem impossible to handle. Addicts and alcoholics are stricken with a malady that causes them to have little insight into the seriousness of their affliction, and the disease is constantly using their own minds to keep them convinced that they will “handle it better next time,” or that “it really wasn’t that bad” or “everyone is doing it,” and on and on. The addicted mind automatically rationalizes and justifies the continued use of the substance it has become addicted to, and minimizes the negative risks and consequences.

As a result, our work is frequently challenging and difficult. Because most attorneys tend to be very intelligent, their “delusional thought systems” can be complicated and convoluted. Trying to reason with someone who has not only learned to lie, but who has become delusional,

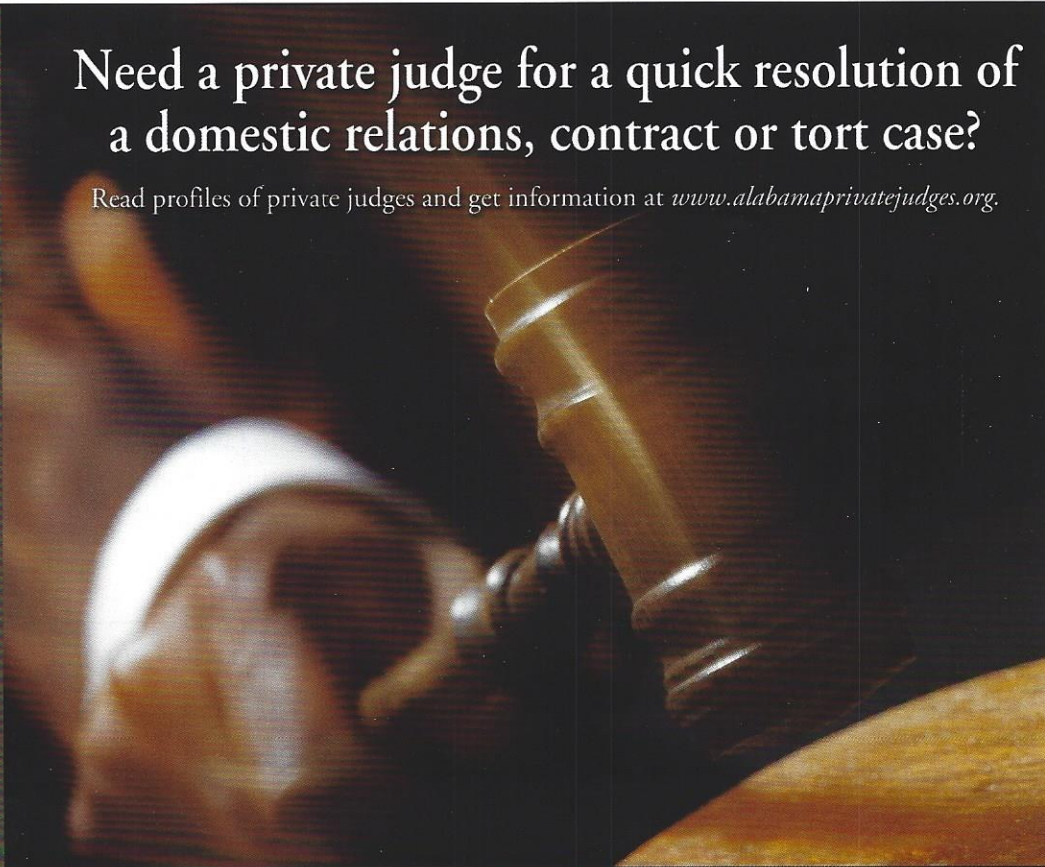


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can be frustrating and even heart-breaking. This is one of the reasons it is so important to continually work to reduce the stigma associated with substance use disorders and mental health issues such as depression, anxiety and bipolar disorder, and to encourage colleagues and loved ones to reach out and get involved.

The recent ground-breaking study that was published in February of this year in the *Journal of Addiction Medicine*, and that is alluded to in various articles in this edition of *The Alabama Lawyer*, shows that the incidence of substance use disorders and other mental health disorders among attorneys is far above that of the general population. These statistics reflect a real need in our profession for people to be willing to reach out and offer assistance, and to avoid the tendency to believe that it is “none of my business” or that “someone else will surely help” or that “they will get better on their own.” People who are suffering with these illnesses literally lack the ability to see the seriousness of their condition, and they desperately need people around them who have the genuine courage to reach out and assist. One of the best ways to do this is to talk with them and let them know that you are concerned, and describe the behaviors that cause the concern. Let them know that there are ways to get help, and encourage them to contact the Alabama Lawyer Assistance Program or to reach out to one of the dedicated members of our committee. If they remain unwilling to do this, and many will, then I urge you to contact us directly. You can provide the basic information that is needed to describe the behaviors of concern, and we will get in touch with the attorney in question. You may do this anonymously if you wish. Our program is strictly confidential!

The names and contact information for our committee members can be found on the Alabama State Bar website (www.alabar.org). Their tireless work and dedication to this cause is truly inspiring. Many of our committee members are also in recovery, and you will

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have the opportunity to read some of their anonymous stories in this edition. They are available to speak with you regarding your concerns, and are uniquely qualified to assist the attorney who is still suffering. Our committee members are the heart and soul of the Alabama Lawyer Assistance Program. They are willing to be involved in informal interventions, to serve as lawyer monitors for attorneys in early recovery, to facilitate “support groups” for attorneys and to provide genuine guidance and support during those early days when it is so desperately needed. One of the worst things that can happen to anyone with a substance use disorder or a mental health issue is to isolate and try to manage things on their own. Our committee members provide the assistance that is absolutely essential for genuine recovery.

I express my sincere gratitude for the opportunity to serve as the director of the Alabama Lawyer Assistance Program. I am deeply grateful to know that this program

has the full support of the Alabama State Bar. Finally, I (again) express my respect and admiration for the passionate and dedicated members of our committee who make this program work.

If this edition of *The Alabama Lawyer* has increased your awareness of the mental health issues that many of our attorneys are facing and the need for increased involvement from colleagues, family and friends, then I will consider this effort a success. Thank you to all who take the time to read these articles. And, thank you in advance to those who become willing to reach out as a result! ▲

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