

Kirkland Latest In BigLaw To Unveil Mental Health Initiative

Kirkland & Ellis on Wednesday unveiled a new firmwide wellness initiative to proactively work with its 2,500 attorneys and staff on issues related to mental health and substance misuse, joining a list of BigLaw firms that have recently rolled out programs targeting those growing areas of concern in the legal profession.

Kirkland & Ellis LLP's Wellbeing Program strives to reduce the stigma around talking about and getting help for mental health and substance misuse issues. The firm has hired Robin Belleau, an attorney and a licensed clinical professional counselor, to lead the program as director, providing resources, support and education on health.

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Robin Belleau

Often people think mental health is confined to conditions such as bipolar disorder or clinical depression and don't necessarily consider talking to someone about anxiety, stress or depression, Belleau told *Law360*.

“We just want to make it known that that's OK to reach out and ask for help with everyday mental health issues,” Belleau said.

She will educate lawyers and staff across three core components — resilience to help them manage and healthy coping strategies for stress, anxiety and depression; connection to reduce the stigma around talking about those issues and encourage them to seek help; and fitness and nutrition to bolster an existing firm program to include healthy eating.

The firm is “really sending the message that if you are concerned about yourself or someone else, you can reach out to me and the Wellbeing Program and ask for assistance,” Belleau said.

The program will use two apps, one focused on mental health and increasing resiliency and overall well-being through activities such as mindfulness meditation and

proper sleep hygiene, and another on moderating potentially addictive behaviors such as substance misuse, overeating and overexercising.

Belleau said she started in her role about three months ago to create the educational resources and finalize the apps. Based in Chicago, she plans to travel to the firm's domestic and international offices to speak about the program.

She is the former executive director of the Illinois Lawyers' Assistance Program that helps judges, lawyers and law students with mental health and substance misuse. She created the Illinois Taskforce on Lawyer Wellbeing and lobbied the Illinois Supreme Court for additional funding to help a greater number of lawyers, according to the firm.

“My hope is that the more we talk about these issues in the legal community the less stigma there is attached to getting help,” Belleau said.

Not only is it important the initiative was unveiled at a firm with Kirkland's size and stature, but also that it's being developed with lawyers in mind, she said.

“They need a program that is easy for them to maneuver within their busy schedules and something that addresses these topics from the perspective of a lawyer,” she said.

The results of a 2016 American Bar Association and Hazelden Betty Ford Foundation national study of about 13,000 licensed lawyers that found 28 percent faced depression, 23 percent dealt with chronic stress, 21 percent faced issues with alcohol and 19 percent handled anxiety “sent shockwaves” throughout the legal industry, Belleau said. Since, Kirkland has been taking steps to create the Wellbeing Program.

Jeffrey Hammes, chairman of Kirkland’s global management executive committee, said the firm is committed to supporting its attorneys’ health.

“We are embracing the call for a more open and transparent dialog about mental health within our profession, and believe this program will become an important part of our culture,” he said in a statement.

In recent months, dozens of law firms have signed an American Bar Association pledge that calls on them to develop a seven-point plan to address substance abuse and mental health issues within

their ranks. Kirkland supports and agrees with the intent of the pledge and the ABA’s efforts, but the firm “wanted the freedom to respond to Kirkland lawyers and create a customized program,” Belleau said, adding that she hopes other shops will follow in offering similar programs to their attorneys and staff.

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