

Kirkland Hires Lawyer Turned Therapist to Lead New Wellness Effort

The firm on Wednesday named Robin Belleau its first firmwide director of well-being. "People come to us when they're in need, so it's very difficult for a lawyer then to say, 'I actually need help,'" she said.

By Dan Packel
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A growing number of large law firms have rolled out initiatives aimed at improving mental health and wellness. When it comes to firms that have hired or redirected a full-time staff member to lead the effort, the list gets shorter.

One deterrent is likely the burden of another hefty salary for a non-fee earner. But if any firm can shoulder the expense, it's Kirkland & Ellis, which announced Wednesday that it is hiring attorney and licensed clinical professional counselor Robin Belleau to oversee a new wellness program.

Belleau, Kirkland's Chicago-based firmwide director of well-being, worked as a lawyer for eight years before she returned to school to become a therapist. She was previously executive director of the Lawyers' Assistance Program in Illinois.

She spoke to *The American Lawyer* on Wednesday about her background and her aims for the position. This interview has been condensed and edited for clarity.

What prompted you to make the move into becoming a therapist?

I was working at that time as a public defender, and when you're working in litigation, there's a lot of stress in the adversarial process, a lot of fighting back and forth.

I didn't so much enjoy that, but I took a look at what I did enjoy about my position. I was a juvenile public defender. Anytime we entered the courtroom,



(Courtesy photo)

Robin Belleau, Kirkland & Ellis

there was always a slew of therapists with us, working with our clients, and I really gravitated to what they were doing. I was working on behalf of my client and so were they, and what drew me to their jobs was that they got to work with the clients more long term. When I would see someone, it would be because they got in trouble, for a couple of times in court. I felt like the therapists could make a real change in their clients' lives.

The criminal law world is a little different from a place like Kirkland. Do you have particular experience navigating the Big Law world as well?

As the executive director of the Illinois Lawyers' Assistance Program, we assisted clients from every

walk of life, and we saw many Big Law lawyers there as well. Even though there is something a little different about being a solo practitioner or working for the government, we all went to law school together, we all passed the same bar, we really all think the same way. Navigating Big Law is not much different.

From your perspective, what are the biggest challenges a firm like Kirkland faces when it comes to promoting mental health and wellness among attorneys and staff?

I think the level of stress that comes along with practicing law, being in an adversarial position throughout the day, it really creates a negative mindset, which can affect your mental health and physical health. Oftentimes people aren't necessarily aware of that and they let it bleed over into their personal lives and into the rest of their day. I think that the adversarial nature of the law that creates that stress, anxiety and depression is the biggest roadblock to achieving mental well-being.

For lawyers in particular, do you find there is a stigma attached to seeking help?

Absolutely. Lawyers see themselves as the problem-solvers of society. People come to us when they're in need, so it's very difficult for a lawyer then to say, "I actually need help," because "What is my client going to think, what is my colleague going to think, what is the judge going to think of my taking time off to get help?"

So, many lawyers don't ask for help.

How do you ensure that your work doesn't go for naught and that lawyers take advantage of the programs you're going to make available?

Starting the conversation and continuing the conversation.

We are the problem-solvers of society, but we're absolutely not perfect, we can ask for help. Asking for

help in terms of stress, anxiety, depression, substance abuse: it absolutely will improve your mental well-being, it will improve your physical health, it will improve your life at home and life at work. I think people who have good mental health are much more productive.

Are there any particular initiatives that you're anticipating putting forward?

Very soon we're going to be announcing the launch of two apps that we're going to be offering our Kirkland staff and lawyers that focus on mental well-being, and also adaptive behaviors and how to make better choices.

This summer and this fall, we're going to be launching a continuing legal education presentation as one of the core components of the program, resiliency, and it's called Strength Under Stress.

The focus of the program is to define resiliency, talk about why it's important to lawyers and the people who work with them, how to manage your stress and develop healthy coping skills.

We are also going to be launching a presentation with regards to how to recognize signs and symptoms of mental health issues and substance misuse issues in your colleagues, your friends and even yourself. More importantly: what to do, how to have that conversation with the person, what are your next steps, and how to connect that person to resources.

Kirkland is a firm that draws significant attention from the media and the wider legal community. Do you have the expectation that your efforts will resonate beyond the firm?

I'm hoping that other firms take a look at what we're doing here and say, "You know what, we need to be doing that, we need to step up for our staff and our attorneys as well, and we need to be promoting well-being and providing people with the connections and resources in order to achieve it."