

LAWYERS Assistance

By J.E. (Buddy) Stockwell

REACH OUT TO LAP!

The Lawyers Assistance Program, Inc. (LAP) has selected “Reach Out” as its central theme for 2014. This focus seeks to encourage lawyers, judges and their family members to be confident in reaching out to help themselves or to help peers and family members in need of LAP’s confidential assistance.

Statistics on mental illness in the legal profession are dismal. Literally thousands of Louisiana lawyers and judges are currently suffering from depression, alcoholism and addiction, and other stress-related conditions such as compassion fatigue.

More than two decades ago, our Supreme Court began to recognize the alarming severity of alcoholism in the legal profession in *LSBA v. Arthur Dumaine*, 550 So.2d 1197 (1989):

“In fact, there is now convincing evidence that chemical dependency is so widespread among the legal profession that it cannot be deterred or even coped with by the normal enforcement of the disciplinary rules. Instead, it is clear that the evil has become ascendant and, if it is to be curbed, must be addressed openly, vigorously and holistically by the entire organized bar;” and that due to the unique nature of the problem, those who suffer should be *“assisted by another attorney who is himself a recovering alcoholic.”*

Unfortunately, our profession’s mental health challenges have drastically changed for the worse since *Dumaine*. Nowadays, the practice of law is more stressful than ever and the ascendant mental health evils are no longer limited to alcoholism. In fact, depression has displaced alcoholism as the number one mental health impairment impacting legal professionals.

It is inescapable that the risk of suicide, the harshest outcome of all, is significantly

intensified within our ranks. Each year we continue to lose a stunning number of Louisiana legal professionals to suicide. With each report of another lawyer who has taken his or her own life, the attendant questions weigh heavily upon us all: Could we or should we have somehow detected the person was at risk for suicide? Could the suicide have been prevented? What, if anything, could any of us have done to avert such tragedies?

That is the focus of this first 2014 installment of “Reach Out to LAP!” All employees at LAP are now certified “suicide prevention gatekeepers” via training through the QPR Institute, an educational organization dedicated to preventing suicide. Headed by Dr. Paul Quinett, a clinical psychologist who has worked in the field of suicide for more than 35 years, the QPR program has developed a methodology for action to save lives. Just like “CPR” (cardiopulmonary resuscitation) is an acronym for the emergency action undertaken to try and save a heart attack victim until professional help arrives, the “QPR” acronym stands for Question, Persuade and Refer — a series of immediate action steps that can actually prevent some suicides.

QPR teaches the individual to listen carefully for warning signs and then ask the right questions to identify whether there may be a suicide risk. If a risk presents, the QPR-trained individual will be prepared to take immediate and effective steps toward encouraging the individual to accept help. The person can then be referred to effective professional help.

In addition to all LAP employees now being certified in QPR, LAP’s full-time clinical director, Leah Rosa, MHS, NCC, LPC, has become certified to actually train and certify others in QPR. Accordingly, LAP hereby reaches out to all Louisiana legal professionals by announcing that LAP now provides QPR training and certification to all those in our profession who are interested

in becoming QPR-certified gatekeepers.

Against that backdrop, let’s revisit the hard questions.

Can we ever see a suicide coming? Yes. With training, warning signs can often be spotted in time to effectively reach out to the person.

Can suicides ever be prevented? Yes. There is no way to prevent all suicides, but suicide is, in fact, highly preventable if QPR is administered.

What can we do to reduce suicides in Louisiana’s legal profession? Reach out to LAP! Get trained in QPR! Get involved!

Either as an individual, or as a representative of your court or law firm, QPR training can make a life-saving difference. Every person who becomes a certified QPR gatekeeper through LAP increases Louisiana’s fabric of legal professionals who are equipped to recognize the warning signs of suicide and ready to take action.

Our Supreme Court’s watershed *Dumaine* opinion of 1989 as to alcoholism is now directly applicable to the ascendant mental health evils we face in the form of depression and suicide. Precisely like alcoholism, the evils of depression and suicide cannot be curbed unless we work together, as lawyers helping lawyers, to openly, vigorously and holistically fight back.

So “Reach Out” to LAP if you need help, are concerned about someone, or would like to be certified in QPR. As always, your call is confidential and you do not have to give your name. Call LAP at (985)778-0571 or visit LAP online at: www.louisianalap.com.

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