

LAWYERS Assistance

By J.E. (Buddy) Stockwell

PLANTING INTERNATIONAL SEEDS

As the executive director of the Lawyers Assistance Program, Inc. (LAP), I conduct dozens of presentations across the state each year. But last October, I was very excited to receive an unexpected invitation to speak to a group of visiting judges from Kazakhstan!

As part of an Open World Delegation, several judges from Kazakhstan spent a week in Louisiana to learn about our legal system. A day-long presentation at the Louisiana Bar Center in New Orleans was part of their visit and various officials from the Louisiana State Bar Association (LSBA) addressed the judges. I had the privilege of speaking on behalf of LAP. I explained to the judges the various services LAP offers to confidentially address the high substance abuse and depression rates found in the legal profession.

Prior to the presentation, I reviewed Kazakhstan's history and culture to better know my audience. One never knows what cultural differences might present the danger of a terrible slip-of-the-tongue *faux pas* or other unintended misunderstanding by an innocent choice of words.

After careful consideration, I saw no reason to edit my general LAP presentation covering mental impairment statistics in the legal profession, the treatable disease aspects of alcoholism, addiction and depression, etc., and a thorough overview of the concept of "lawyers helping lawyers" that launched LAP over two decades ago. I also explained that LAP's mission now extends to "judges helping judges." We face an ever-increasing challenge of reaching many who still suffer.

I explained that reaching out is not always easy because lawyers and judges are professionally trained never to surrender and never to ask for help. In many cases, impaired lawyers or judges in denial will not initially accept help. Instead, they will attempt to greatly diminish or

Lawyers Assistance Program, Inc. (LAP)

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completely deny the true seriousness of their condition(s).

I also spoke about how LAP could not be nearly as effective as it is without the Louisiana Supreme Court's recognition of effective treatment facilitation and recovery monitoring through LAP, supporting legislation and court rules that provide confidentiality to those who reach out to LAP, and the support of the LSBA and its Committee on Alcohol and Drug Abuse that makes it possible to carry out LAP's mission statewide. LAP's successful efforts reflect indispensable support from many people and entities within our profession. I explained that I rely on, and exchange information with, other LAP programs nationwide to help further LAP's mission in Louisiana.

While addressing the judges, I tried my best to speak slowly so the two interpreters could accurately translate and transmit my comments into the judges' electronic ear pieces. Soon into my presentation, the judges began cross-talking quite a bit and in a language I obviously could not understand, even seemingly ignoring me altogether at one point.

The cross-talk amongst the judges got so unnerving to me that I stopped to politely ask if I should wait to continue speaking and whether everything was alright. A rapid-fire exchange of many words between the visiting judges and the interpreters garnered only a simple "no problem, everything is fine." Honestly, I did not know how it was going and the body language of the judges was very hard to read!

After my presentation, however, I was pleased when the judges had lots of questions and were extremely interested in the subject matter. Their comments and questions reflected they were paying keen attention despite all the cross-talk. Their interest in LAP had been piqued. The visiting judges completely related to the difficulty of getting lawyers and judges to surrender and ask for help.

The judges explained that, at present, they perceive that impairment problems in Kazakhstan's legal profession emanate primarily from alcoholism. Depression is not something they have focused on. After hearing about our general statistics in the legal profession both in Louisiana and the United States where depression rates exceed alcoholism rates, the judges articulated an interest in becoming better able to recognize and help depressed lawyers and judges in their country, too.

At the end of the event, the judges said they had never heard of, nor envisioned, a program like LAP. They think it is a fantastic idea and greatly needed in their legal profession too. One judge said: "Please know that we will remember this day and that we learned about LAP here during our visit to Louisiana. Thank you!"

While LAP has planted a seed of hope in Kazakhstan, its attention remains focused upon the large number of lawyers and judges who still suffer in Louisiana. For confidential help, call LAP at (866)354-9334, email lap@louisianalap.com, or visit LAP online at www.louisianalap.com.

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