

Innovations from the U.S. Probation and Pretrial Services Wellness Committee During the Pandemic

Stephanie Denton, Training and Safety Division Chief

Probation and Pretrial Services Office

Administrative Office of the U.S. Courts

Melinda Torres Felix, Supervisory U.S. Probation Officer, Northern District of Illinois

Chair, U.S. Probation and Pretrial Services Wellness Committee

Monica Mannino, Supervisory U.S. Probation Officer, Eastern District of Missouri

Vice-Chair, U.S. Probation and Pretrial Services Wellness Committee

LaToya Myles, U.S. Probation Officer, Middle District of Florida

Secretary, U.S. Probation and Pretrial Services Wellness Committee

IN SEPTEMBER 2007, the Chiefs Advisory Group (CAG) supported a plan, proposed by then Assistant Director John Hughes of the former Office of Probation and Pretrial Services (OPPS), to start a wellness program for the federal probation and pretrial services workforce as a legacy to OPPS Probation Administrator Migdalia “Miggie” Baerga-Bufler, who died by suicide on August 22, 2007. The office created a six-member Wellness Steering Committee, which commenced work in October 2007.

As U.S. Probation and Pretrial Services officers began to show greater interest in their own mental health and desire to share their knowledge and experience with other officers, and because of the number of proposed wellness projects, it became apparent that more committee members were needed. Officer wellness was becoming not only a focal point for officers but a priority for our system.¹

Today, the newly named U.S. Probation and Pretrial Services Wellness Committee

focuses on all staff in the U.S. Probation and Pretrial Services agency. Together the committee:

- Increases awareness of wellness services that are available for all staff.
- Promotes the use of the committee’s electronic learning modules (ELMs) on wellness.
- Makes curriculum recommendations regarding wellness to the Federal Probation and Pretrial Academy and the Probation and Pretrial Services Office.
- Hosts national wellness conferences (in person and virtual).
- Assists districts in creating internal wellness committees and Critical Incident Stress Management (CISM) teams.
- Released a Casualty Assistance Guide to assist chiefs and managers during a critical incident or following a death.
- Maintains a wellness website accessible to all employees.
- Provides wellness training to districts.

From 2014 through 2016, the committee developed and launched six wellness-related ELMs customized for probation and

pretrial services staff. Topics include Stress and Resiliency Training, Suicide Prevention and Awareness, Fitness and Nutrition, Secondary Trauma, Recognizing Burnout, and Wellness for Managers. These ELMs are interactive, thought provoking, and take approximately one hour to complete. They can be accessed on a computer, phone, or iPad at the user’s pace. A training certificate is awarded at the end of each course.

The Casualty Assistance Guide was created by the Committee in 2017. This document is designed to assist chiefs and managers during a critical incident or following a death. Its purpose is to help guide administration through what would be an intense and potentially tragic situation. The guide covers every step of the process from notification of a death/serious injury to loved ones to how to deal with and manage their staff. The document is easily accessible through the Probation and Pretrial Services Wellness Website.

The year 2018 was marked by the Probation and Pretrial Services Wellness Conference, Combating Risk Through Wellness, the first of its kind in the U.S. Probation and Pretrial

¹ *News and Views* Special Issue Article VOL. XXXIII, NO. 10 May 12, 2008.

Services system. The three-day conference in St. Louis, Missouri, offered a wide range of topics and presenters that covered various dimensions of wellness. Conference attendees could also participate in such physical fitness demonstrations as kickboxing, yoga, a run/walk, and meditation. Impactful keynote speakers presented each day before participants went into smaller breakout sessions. The conference was well received and attended by over 350 U.S. Probation and Pretrial Services employees throughout the country, with overwhelming appreciation expressed for it. The committee has received multiple requests to host more such conferences and plans to do so.

In December 2018, the Federal Judicial Center (FJC) formed a planning committee to develop a curriculum on Resilience and Workload Management. The committee consists of U.S. Probation and Pretrial Services support staff, officers, supervisors, assistant deputy chiefs, and PPSO and FJC staff. The U.S. Probation and Pretrial Services Wellness Committee also has a representative on this planning committee to collaborate on efforts in the area of wellness.

Resilience and Workload Management are 2 of the 10 competencies identified for experienced probation and pretrial services officers.² These competencies are areas of proficiency essential for successful performance on the job. Resilience is wellness. The FJC defines resilience as the ability to maintain purpose, effectiveness, and mission-focus in challenging situations. It is desirable that officers be able to recognize maladaptive coping behaviors and signs of chronic stress, secondary trauma, burnout, and compassion fatigue in themselves and others. Acknowledging resiliency as a core competency is a tremendous achievement for the agency. In connection with resilience, the planning committee is developing a curriculum around the workload management competency. Officers who demonstrate Workload Management preserve their longevity in the field by taking advantage of wellness resources and using healthy coping strategies to manage work-related stress.

The Probation and Pretrial Services Wellness website was launched in June 2020, during the COVID-19 pandemic. The members of the Probation and Pretrial Services Wellness Committee had already been already discussing plans to launch the

website. However, due to the pandemic, it was launched sooner than planned. Committee members worked hard during this time to bring ideas, resources, and creativity to the development of the site. The website is housed on the JNet,³ the federal judiciary intranet site maintained by the AO, and is inclusive to all Probation and Pretrial Services employees. Since the launch of the website, it has been viewed by 2,163 employees. The website is frequently updated with current resources.

Also in 2020, the Committee created the Wellness Wisdom Newsletter, which highlights districts' wellness practices within the probation and pretrial services community. The newsletter is published quarterly and made available by email subscription delivery to employees. Prior newsletter issues can also be found on the Probation and Pretrial Services Wellness website. This provided another opportunity to have a sense of community with peers across the nation during the pandemic. Currently, there are 531 subscribers to the newsletter.

In a further collaboration with the Federal Judicial Center, a few committee members were guests on the FJC podcast "Off Paper" in 2021, discussing wellness challenges facing the system and the work of the Committee. Supervisory U.S. Probation Officer Melinda Torres Felix (Illinois Northern), chair of the committee, discussed what it means to be physically and mentally well, the journey of the wellness committee, and the resources available to employees. Other speakers included Supervisory U.S. Probation Officer Monica Mannino (Missouri Eastern), vice chair of the committee; Chief Probation Officer Wade Warren (North Dakota), committee member; Chief Melissa Alexander (North Carolina Middle); and U.S. Probation Officers Tiffany Vega (Illinois Northern) and Johnny Alexander (Kentucky Western), who also shared their perspectives on wellness.

The success of the 2018 wellness conference sparked the Committee to make plans to deliver a conference biennially. Originally scheduled for July 2020 in Atlanta, the second conference had to be canceled due to the pandemic. However, the committee searched for a way to deliver training and resources remotely, resulting in another milestone for the agency—our first-ever virtual conference. The Winter Wellness Conference, "Coping Is Hoping," was delivered in February 2021 over four days across a two-week span to

account for employees' busy schedules during this unprecedented time. All sessions were recorded for future viewing. A variety of wellness topics were presented, including Changes and Considerations to the SF-86, Stress First Aid, When Inclusion Impacts Wellness: Pronouns Matter, Assessing Yourself Through the 8 Dimensions of Wellness, Sleep and Dreams, Suicide Prevention and Awareness, and Depression and Adjustment Disorders. Approximately 250 participants attended each session. The virtual conference was an overwhelming success. Of those who completed the survey, 94.63 percent were either "very satisfied" or "satisfied" with the overall conference. A common theme from the survey was the idea of getting back to an in-person conference. In-person conferences provide a lot of value: a safe place to share ideas, comments, and concerns in breakout sessions; direct dialog with presenters; and networking through interpersonal contacts. The Committee plans to deliver another in-person conference as soon as it is safe to do so.

Committee members continue to assist districts with wellness resources; however, this assistance has moved to a virtual platform. The Committee has provided virtual consultations on starting district wellness programs and conducted virtual presentations to individual districts on a variety of wellness topics. Many districts have hosted virtual conferences locally for their staff, and committee members have presented on an array of topics in these virtual conferences.

As previously mentioned, the Committee was formed due to a tragedy in the system where a suicide took the life of an employee. This was not the first suicide in the system, and unfortunately it has not been the last. The goal of the Committee has always been to shine a light on the public health challenges of suicide and make the topic a part of everyday conversations in the workplace. In 2019, suicide was the tenth leading cause of death in the United States and the fourth leading cause of death in those between ages 35–54.⁴ Suicide affects law enforcement officers, including probation and pretrial services staff, at an even higher rate. In fact, law enforcement officers are more likely to die by suicide than in the line of duty. There were 228 identified deaths

² Federal Judicial Center (June 2018) Competencies for Experienced U.S. Probation and Pretrial Services Officers.

³ The JNet is the intranet for the Federal Courts.

⁴ Suicide Statistics (N.D) <https://afsp.org/suicide-statistics/>

⁵ Record number of LEO's dies by suicide in 2019 (2020, January 3) www.police1.com/police-heroes/articles/record-number-of-leos-died-by-suicide-in-2019-ezeG0dSGdKz7pc39/

by suicide among law enforcement officers in 2019.⁵ The Committee believes suicide prevention and awareness is a critical part of staff wellness. Therefore, the Committee provides tools and resources to assist in suicide prevention and awareness. The Committee has:

- Developed a suicide prevention and awareness ELM. The module was developed to educate staff on recognizing the warning signs of suicide and the steps to take when faced with crisis situations.
- During the “Combating Risk Through Wellness” Conference, geared four breakout sessions toward suicide prevention and awareness.
- Ensured recognition is given to National Suicide Prevention Month in September.
- Placed multiple resources on the Probation and Pretrial Services Wellness Website regarding suicide prevention and awareness.
- Sent special announcements chief U.S. probation and pretrial services officers regarding suicide prevention and

awareness resources.

- Provided for publication in *News and Views*, PPSO’s newsletter for probation and pretrial services staff, Information regarding risk factors and warning signs .
- Continued to work diligently to identify resources, trainings, webinars, and other tools to help build awareness and take action to prevent suicide within your community.
- Included a certified Question Persuade Respond (QPR) facilitator as a member. This member has provided QPR training to district probation and pretrial services staff throughout the country as well as during the virtual Winter Wellness Conference in February 2021. Interested Committee members will be certified in QPR in the near future.

Due to the increased rate of suicide in the system, in 2020 the Committee drafted a form letter template for district chiefs and their designees to distribute to employees and their families. The letter provides information

on WorkLife4You, the Employee Assistance Program (EAP), and suicide prevention resources. There is also a section with information regarding the district’s local wellness committee. The Committee recommends that the letter be mailed to the employees’ home address so that it can be used and viewed by both the staff member and their families.

We all play a vital role in preventing suicide and saving lives. If you, or someone you know, is struggling, help is available.

National Suicide Prevention Lifeline

1-800-273-(TALK) 8255

Crisis Text Line

Text HOME or HELLO to 741741

Institute on Aging’s Friendship Line

(for people 60+)

1-800-971-0016

BlueHelp.org