

Legal profession helps its own substance abusers

By TIM CARVELL
STAFF WRITER

If the statistics are to be believed, the scales of justice are increasingly flawed by drugs and alcohol.

According to some estimates, 20 percent of lawyers and judges in Michigan have substance abuse problems, and many of them are finding it difficult to reach out for help.

That's where the Lawyers and Judges Recovery Network Helpline comes in. The Helpline, sponsored by the State Bar Association, is designed to provide advice and assistance for substance abusers in the legal profession. Created 14 years ago, the Helpline has helped hundreds of lawyers and judges break the cycle of drug or alcohol addiction.

Renee Gerger, whose West Bloomfield private counseling firm, Gerger, Spivack and Associates, is contracted by the Bar to staff the Helpline, said certain aspects of the legal profession tend themselves to substance abuse.

"It's a very high-pressure job, and attorneys can isolate themselves," Gerger said. "There are people in your office who can cover for you."

Most abuse alcohol

Perhaps because alcohol is more available and socially acceptable, she added, alcohol abusers outnumber drug users 4-to-1.

Not only are lawyers and judges high-risk candidates for substance abuse, but, once hooked, they find it harder than most to

reach out for help, according to Professor Jerry Boston of Lansing's Cooley Law School, chairman of the State Bar's substance abuse program.

"The problem is that lawyers and judges are often afraid to go to regular recovery groups, because they are afraid they'll be seen by clients . . . or because they are afraid it will hurt them professionally," Boston said.

Privacy need not be an issue for those who contact the Helpline; the organization operates under a policy of strict confidentiality. For addicts and alcoholics who call in, the State Bar pays for a private consultation so they may determine an appropriate mode of treatment; it even operates Alcoholics Anonymous and Narcotics Anonymous meetings specifically for those in the legal profession, to allow substance abusers who fear loss of community status complete confidentiality of treatment.

Often, however, addicts and alcoholics can't face their own problems; for this reason, the Helpline also offers assistance to those who are affected by the abuse: family,

friends, and co-workers. Gerger said the Helpline has recently expanded its efforts to act upon the behalf of those who witness the effects of alcohol or drug addiction; whereas the Helpline used to be an outlet for those seeking help for their own problems, it is now also becoming a resource for those who want to help substance abusers who are in denial.

Helpless feeling

"People generally, when they're dealing with the problem of a substance abuser, feel helpless," Gerger said, noting that the Helpline is now prepared to combat that feeling of helplessness.

The key to helping substance abusers in denial, according to Boston, is a meeting known as an "intervention," in which friends and family, assisted by addiction specialists, confront the addict with evidence of the destruction caused by his or her addiction.

"Let's say a partner calls and

tells us, 'I've got a partner who's becoming a problem,' and says, 'let's set up an intervention.' Now, we're going to be able to do that. Before, we had self-referral," Boston said.

In preparing an intervention, Gerger said, she always makes sure that the addict wants to seek treatment; 75 percent of the substance abusers for whom she arranges interventions, she said, agree to treatment immediately. For the remaining 25 percent, Gerger has the addict's friends and family present him with an ultimatum: enter treatment, or face life without our support. Of

that 25 percent, she noted, only a small fraction fails to choose treatment.

"The (interventions) I've done on a corporate level have been very successful," Gerger said. "It's a very impactful way to get someone to see what the problem is."

While the Helpline's focus is on substance abusers and their circle of friends, family and co-workers, Boston is quick to note that the program was conceived with another victim of substance abuse in mind: the person who has to contend with a lawyer or judge rendered less effective by substance abuse.

"It's not that we're a bunch of do-gooders," Boston said. "We have a responsibility to the client public to prevent damage before it occurs, because the people who are hurt go beyond the lawyer and his family; it's the client who gets hurt."

The Lawyers and Judges Recovery Network Helpline can be reached 24 hours a day, 7 days a week at 352-6002. It is completely confidential and accepts collect calls. The Lawyers and Judges AA and NA groups meet locally at 6 p.m. Wednesdays at Kirk in the Hills Presbyterian Church in Bloomfield Hills.

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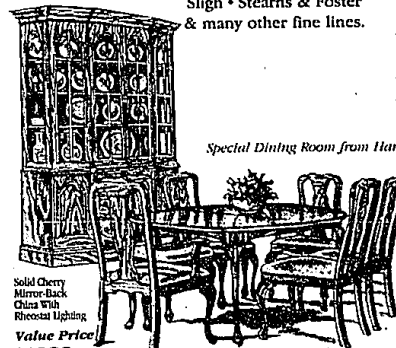
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