



The Numbers Are In: A New Look at Lawyer Well-Being in Kansas

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The legal profession has long treated chronic exhaustion, high-conflict environments, and extraordinary workloads as simply part of the job. Long hours are a badge of honor. Stress is expected. Lawyers learn early to push through fatigue, compartmentalize difficult experiences, and keep going.

Increasingly, the data suggests that what the profession has normalized comes at a significant cost. National research—and more recent data from Kansas lawyers themselves—shows troubling rates of depression, anxiety, problematic drinking, burnout, and other forms of psychological distress among members of the profession.

Based on that data, in Kansas alone, an estimated 2,000 to 3,000 licensed attorneys may be struggling with mental health or substance-use issues that affect their personal or professional lives. These are not simply individual wellness concerns. They have consequences for lawyers, their families and colleagues, their clients, and ultimately the legal system itself.

Facing Reality: Mental Health by the Numbers

For years, the systemic toll of legal practice was discussed largely through anecdotes. Over the past decade, however, research from the American Bar Association (ABA), the Hazelden Betty Ford Foundation, and researchers studying lawyer well-being has begun to quantify the mental health and substance-use challenges facing the profession.

The numbers established a troubling baseline. A landmark 2016 study of nearly 13,000 lawyers found that 28% experienced mild-to-severe depression, 19% experienced work-related anxiety, and 22% reported work-related stress.¹ That study also found significant levels of problematic drinking among lawyers.²³ Additional research found that between 10% and 12% of U.S. lawyers had contemplated suicide, compared to about 4% of adults in the general population.⁴

Those numbers helped move the conversation about lawyer well-being beyond anecdotes. They demonstrated that depression, anxiety, problematic alcohol use, suicidal ideation, and burnout were not isolated problems affecting a small number of lawyers, but significant concerns across the profession.

Now, nearly a decade later, we have new data, and, importantly, we have data from Kansas lawyers themselves.

In 2025, researchers at the University of Minnesota conducted a nationwide follow-up study to examine how the profession has fared since the earlier research. Kansas participated in the study, providing an important opportunity to look beyond national statistics and examine the experiences of lawyers practicing here at home.⁵ The national study was published in September 2026, and Kansas also received jurisdiction-specific results providing a new and revealing snapshot of lawyer well-being in the state.⁶

Unfortunately, the new numbers do not suggest that Kansas lawyers have escaped the challenges identified in earlier research.

The results are sobering. Among Kansas respondents:

- 31.8% reported symptoms of depression;
- 25.4% reported anxiety;
- 25.8% self-reported scores consistent with problematic or hazardous drinking;
- 58.4% reported working 41+ hours per week;
- 80.9% reported moderate to very high workplace burnout;
- 58.2% reported moderate to very high work-family conflict;
- 37.3% said the profession had harmed their mental health;
- 24.7% considered leaving the profession because of stress or burnout; and
- 63.7% reported at least occasionally and sometimes regularly observing mental health or substance-use concerns in colleagues.^{7,8}

These numbers make clear that lawyer well-being is not a problem affecting only a small subset of the profession. Even if they don't know one of their colleagues is suffering, most Kansas lawyers do know someone who is suffering.

In April 2025, well before the results of this latest study were available, the Kansas Supreme Court created the Ad Hoc Committee for Well-Being in Law to examine issues affecting lawyer well-being in Kansas and make recommendations to the Court. The release of the new study provides the Committee with important, and timely, Kansas-specific data to inform that work. The Committee will soon present the study results, along with other information it has gathered, to the Court and make recommendations for improving lawyer well-being in Kansas. In the meantime, the study itself highlights several areas of particular concern.

Depression and Anxiety

The new Kansas data show significant levels of both depression and anxiety among members of the profession. In the general adult public, about 8% of people experience a major depressive episode and 19% experience an anxiety disorder in a given year.⁹ But in the attorney population, nearly one-third of Kansas respondents—31.8%—reported at least mild symptoms of depression, while 25.4% reported at least mild symptoms of anxiety.¹⁰ These conditions can affect more than a lawyer's personal well-being. Persistent depression and anxiety can interfere with concentration, sleep, memory, decision-making, and the cognitive reserves necessary to manage the demands of legal practice.

Substance Use

More than one-quarter—25.8%—of Kansas lawyers surveyed reported scores consistent with problematic or hazardous drinking.¹¹

That finding is particularly concerning given the longstanding relationship between alcohol and the culture of legal practice. Lawyers often work in environments in which alcohol is readily available and socially accepted, while simultaneously facing long hours, adversarial interactions, demanding clients, and significant pressure to perform. For some lawyers, alcohol or other substances can become a means of coping with those pressures.

The Kansas results also suggest that the effects of substance use and mental health concerns extend well beyond those who personally report them: 63.7% of respondents said they had observed mental health or substance-use concerns in their colleagues.¹²

Suicidal Ideation

Perhaps the most sobering metric is the prevalence of suicidal ideation. Prior estimates show that 10% to 12% of lawyers report having contemplated suicide, compared to just 4.2% of the general adult population.¹³ Research also shows a powerful association between stress and suicidal ideation among lawyers. In one study, lawyers reporting high perceived stress had approximately 22 times the odds of suicidal ideation compared with lawyers reporting low perceived stress.¹⁴

Behind every statistic is a lawyer—a colleague, friend, mentor, employee, supervisor, parent, spouse, or child. That is why recognizing signs of serious distress and making help accessible cannot be treated as peripheral concerns for the profession.

Burnout and the Judicial Bench

The problem does not stop at counsel table. Lawyers experience burnout for many reasons: demanding workloads, exposure to client trauma, lack of sleep, financial pressures, difficult

professional relationships, and the expectation of near-constant availability. For judges, many of those pressures are compounded by a distinct form of professional isolation.

On the bench, judges face significant docket pressures, professional isolation, and repeated exposure to traumatic material. National judicial stress data reflects the toll those pressures can take. In a national survey of more than 1,000 judges, 38.8% reported fatigue and low energy after hearing several cases in a row, 36% reported sleep disturbance, and 32.3% reported interference with attention and concentration.¹⁵ Earlier research also found that 45% of judges report experiencing secondary traumatic stress associated with repeated exposure to gruesome evidence, child-welfare cases, violent crime, and other traumatic material.¹⁶

The demands of judicial office can also make it particularly difficult to address that stress. Unlike practicing lawyers, judges may have fewer opportunities to speak candidly with colleagues about what they are experiencing because of ethical obligations and the unique constraints of judicial office. The data are an important reminder that professional achievement does not provide immunity from depression, burnout, fatigue, or trauma.

Why Does the Law Breed Distress?

There is no single explanation for the profession's elevated levels of distress. But several characteristics of legal culture appear repeatedly.

Perfectionism and stoicism. Lawyers are trained to identify mistakes, anticipate worst-case scenarios, and project confidence. Those skills can be enormously useful in representing clients, but they can become harmful when turned inward. A lawyer who believes competence means never struggling may be reluctant to admit when help is needed. Legal education and firm hierarchies explicitly reward emotional detachment and stoicism. Admitting to psychological distress is culturally weaponized as a sign of professional weakness.

The adversarial framework. Conflict is built into much of legal practice. Lawyers routinely work in situations where the interests of their clients are directly opposed and where the consequences of failure may be substantial. Remaining in that environment day after day can take a psychological toll. This continuous state of interpersonal hostility keeps the autonomic nervous system locked in a permanent, low-grade "fight-or-flight" response.

The economics of legal practice. In many practice settings, time quite literally is money. Billable-hour requirements can make rest, family obligations, exercise, medical appointments, and other forms of recovery feel like lost productivity. Lawyers outside private practice face different pressures—heavy caseloads, limited resources, staffing shortages, and public responsibilities—but the result may be similar: workloads that are higher than what can be completed in a given timeframe.

The 2026 national study found that psychological distress increased with hours worked and rose particularly sharply beyond 50 hours per week. Lawyers working 71 or more hours had roughly three times the prevalence of moderate-or-higher stress and twice the prevalence of anxiety compared with those working 31–40 hours.¹⁷

And perhaps most importantly, lawyers are very good at functioning while struggling. Professional competence can mask significant distress for a surprisingly long time. Professionals, even those working in behavioral health roles, can often mistake intelligence, articulate speech and logical reasoning as a sign of someone who is doing well emotionally, without considering how second nature many of these behaviors are to attorneys. Attorneys will frequently report “thinking like a lawyer” in the face of difficult emotions.

Well-Being and Our Professional Responsibilities

The consequences of lawyer impairment extend beyond personal health. They can eventually affect the lawyer's ability to meet professional obligations.

Kansas Rule of Professional Conduct 1.1 requires competent representation. Competence depends not merely on knowing the law, but on being able to analyze complex facts, exercise judgment, track deadlines, communicate with clients, and follow through on professional obligations. Serious depression, anxiety, burnout, or substance misuse erode executive functioning. When an attorney avoids a file, misses a statutory deadline, or fails to communicate with a client, it is rarely due to a lack of legal knowledge—it is almost always the consequence of a collapsing nervous system.

Supervisors also have an important role. Rules 5.1 and 5.2 address responsibilities within supervisory relationships. Whatever the precise circumstances, law firms, government offices, courts, and other legal employers benefit when supervisors recognize that a colleague's sudden missed deadlines, withdrawal, erratic behavior, or declining work performance may warrant concern rather than simply criticism. Ignoring signs of substance abuse, extreme burnout, or erratic behavior in junior associates or clerks creates significant institutional liability and violates these rules.

This does not mean that every bad day or missed deadline is evidence of a mental health crisis. It does mean that lawyer well-being and professional responsibility cannot be neatly separated.

The Kansas Lifeline: KALAP

Fortunately, Kansas lawyers do not have to navigate these problems alone.

The Kansas Supreme Court established the Kansas Lawyers Assistance Program (KALAP) under Kansas Supreme Court Rule 233 in 2001. KALAP exists to help lawyers, judges, and law students

address mental health concerns, substance use, stress, burnout, grief, and other challenges before those problems cause lasting damage to their lives or careers.

One of the most important features of KALAP is confidentiality. Fear remains a powerful barrier to seeking help, particularly in a profession where lawyers may worry that acknowledging a problem could jeopardize their reputation or license. The Kansas survey found that 51.8% identified professional reputation or career harm as a barrier to seeking help and 50.7% identified confidentiality concerns.¹⁸ But KALAP is structured to provide a confidential environment in which members of the legal profession can seek assistance. Under Supreme Court Rule 233 (i) individuals working with KALAP enjoy communications that are privileged and treated as attorney-client communications. Further, none of KALAP's information is subject to discovery or subpoena.

Its services are funded through attorney registration fees and are provided at no cost to participants. Those services include weekly peer groups focused on stress management and resiliency, a 12-step recovery group, a monthly mindfulness group, and a structured grief processing program.

KALAP also maintains a statewide network of approximately 100 attorney volunteers who provide one-on-one peer support. Many volunteers have faced similar challenges themselves, allowing lawyers seeking assistance to talk with someone who understands both the problem and the particular pressures of practicing law.

KALAP can also connect lawyers with professional evaluations, therapeutic resources, and treatment providers; provide individual counseling through clinical partners; assist with diversion and probation monitoring when appropriate; and offer free educational programming and CLEs to law firms, courts, and local, specialty, and statewide bar associations.

Perhaps most importantly, contacting KALAP does not require waiting until a problem becomes a crisis. A lawyer does not need to have reached "rock bottom," be facing discipline, or have a diagnosed mental illness to ask for help.

Changing What We Normalize

The legal profession requires sharp analytical skills, sound judgment, persistence, and resilience. Protecting those abilities means recognizing that lawyers are human beings rather than infinitely renewable professional resources.

For decades, the profession has sometimes confused suffering with commitment: the lawyer who never takes a vacation, answers emails at midnight, works through illness, or refuses to acknowledge stress is treated as exceptionally dedicated. The data suggests that model is not sustainable.

Changing that culture does not mean lowering professional standards. It means creating a profession in which asking for help before a problem becomes a crisis is itself understood as an act of professional responsibility.

And sometimes the most important intervention is remarkably simple: noticing that a colleague does not seem like themselves and asking, sincerely, whether they are okay.

Seeking Help

If you, a colleague, a judge, or a law student are struggling with stress, burnout, depression, anxiety, substance misuse, or another challenge, contact the Kansas Lawyers Assistance Program at **(785) 368-8275** or visit **kalapks.gov**.

You do not have to wait for a crisis to ask for help.

¹ Patrick R. Krill & Justin J. Anker, “When Demands Equal Distress: An Updated Understanding of Lawyer Mental Health and Well-Being,” 415 *Journal of Affective Disorders* 122479, PDF p. 8 (2026) (comparing the 2026 results with the 2016 benchmark and reporting 2016 rates of 28.3% for at-least-mild depression, 19.3% for anxiety, and 22.7% for stress).

² Patrick R. Krill, JD, LLM, Ryan Johnson, MA, and Linda Albert, MSSW, “The Prevalence of Substance Use and Other Mental Health Concerns Among American Attorneys” *J Addict Med*, Volume 10, Number 1, January/February 2016.

³ Patrick R. Krill et al., “Stressed, Lonely, and Overcommitted: Predictors of Lawyer Suicide Risk,” 11 *Healthcare* 536, PDF p. 1 (2023) (describing the earlier nationwide study of approximately 13,000 lawyers as finding 21% with alcohol-use problems).

⁴ *Id.* at PDF p. 1 (reporting prior estimates that between 10% and 12% of U.S. lawyers have contemplated suicide, compared to 4.2% in the general adult population).

⁵ Patrick R. Krill & Justin J. Anker, “Participating Jurisdiction Report for: Kansas” 1 (May 19, 2026) (explaining Kansas’s participation in the 2025–2026 ABA CoLAP/Krill Strategies national lawyer mental-health research project).

⁶ Krill & Anker, “When Demands Equal Distress,” *supra* note 1, at PDF p. 1 (describing the multi-jurisdiction national study and reporting the principal national prevalence results).

⁷ Krill & Anker, “*Participating Jurisdiction Report*,” *supra* note 4, at 2 (reporting Kansas respondents’ weekly work hours; the published categories establish at least 58.4% working 41 or more hours because the 71+ category is suppressed).

⁸ *Id.* at 3–4 (reporting Kansas depression, anxiety, hazardous-drinking, burnout, work-family-conflict, mental-health-harm, retention, and observed-colleague indicators).

⁹ National Institute of Mental Health, “Major Depression,” under “Prevalence of Major Depressive Episode Among Adults” (unpaginated) (reporting 8.3% past-year prevalence of major depressive episodes among U.S. adults in 2021); National Institute of Mental Health, “Any Anxiety Disorder,” under “Prevalence of Any Anxiety Disorder Among Adults” (unpaginated) (reporting estimated 19.1% past-year prevalence among U.S. adults).

¹⁰ Krill & Anker, “*Participating Jurisdiction Report*,” *supra* note 4, at 3.

¹¹ *Id.* at 3 (reporting that 25.8% of Kansas respondents screened positive for higher-risk hazardous drinking).

¹² *Id.* at 4 (reporting that 15.5% regularly and 48.2% occasionally observed mental-health or substance-use problems among legal colleagues).

¹³ Krill et al., “Stressed, Lonely, and Overcommitted,” *supra* note 3, at PDF p. 1 (reporting prior estimates that 10–12% of U.S. lawyers have contemplated suicide compared with 4.2% of U.S. adults).

¹⁴ *Id.* at PDF p. 8 (finding that lawyers reporting high perceived stress had approximately 22 times the odds of suicidal ideation compared with lawyers reporting low perceived stress; intermediate stress was associated with approximately 5.5 times the odds).

¹⁵ David Swenson et al., *Stress and Resiliency in the U.S. Judiciary*, 2020 J. Prof. Law. 1, 12–13 (2020).

¹⁶ *Id.* at 4.

¹⁷ Krill & Anker, “When Demands Equal Distress,” *supra* note 1, at PDF p. 9 (reporting that distress prevalence increased with weekly hours, with the gradient rising most sharply beyond 50 hours; lawyers working 71 or more hours had approximately three times the prevalence of moderate-to-severe stress and twice the prevalence of anxiety compared with lawyers working 31–40 hours).

¹⁸ Krill & Anker, “Participating Jurisdiction Report,” *supra* note 4, at 5 (reporting professional reputation/career harm, 51.8%, and confidentiality concerns, 50.7%, as the two most commonly identified barriers to seeking help among Kansas respondents).

About the Authors



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Meryl Carver-Allmond serves as General Counsel to the Chief Justice of the Kansas Supreme Court. Her work encompasses judicial administration, legal policy, and initiatives addressing judicial well-being. She is also involved with the Kansas Task Force on Lawyer Well-Being.



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