**New Jersey Lawyers Assistance Program’s**

**Crisis Communications during CoVID19 Quarantine**

**Introduction:** The **New Jersey Lawyers Assistance Program** is a confidential, free, and independent program assisting attorneys, judges, law students, and law graduates with substance use and mental health issues affecting personal and professional well-being. The program offers assessments, referrals to substance use disorder and mental health resources if necessary, and ongoing support.

As part of the vision to help attorneys achieve and maintain well-being, **NJLAP** delivers prevention and educational programs throughout the state. NJLAP maintains an active social media presence, sharing news, updates and health-related information of special interest to attorneys. A quarterly newsletter focuses on ***“Balance”*** and its importance.

In addition, **NJLAP** assists NJ Bar Candidates who choose **NJLAP** as their provider for an evaluation requested by the NJ Character and Fitness Committee.

**NJLAP** facilitates several support groups and is associated with **Lawyers Concerned for Lawyers** (LCL) meetings. **NJLAP** helped establish the **Association of Professionals for the Treatment of Problem Gambling** (APTPG.)

**NJLAP** has no reporting relationships with the NJ OAE, bar associations, or any entity or tribunal. Funding is providing by a minimal assessment on all lawyer license renewal fees.

**January 2020-June 2020 - ramp up**

**July 2020 – present – implementation and adjustments**

With the closure of the NJ Law Center and the institution of working from home, NJLAP found itself technically unprepared. The program did not have secured laptops for staff to use offsite, did not use cloud-based office management systems, and did not have access to the confidential client database offsite. As a result, staff was in a crisis situation, and work-arounds and other processes needed to be created right away.

**Priority Issues**

1. **Communications with clients as well as all New Jersey attorneys**
   1. Phone calls coming into the 800 number
   2. Messaging regarding office closing, availability of program services, etc
   3. Status of support groups and other meetings and events
2. **Communications between staff members**
   1. Email
   2. Conference calling, Video conferencing

**Immediate Steps Taken**

1. **800 Number Calls:** NJSBA assisted with getting calls from the 800 number forwarded, rather than callers having to leave messages for later staff retrieval. Calls were forwarded to support staff to triage and distribute to counselors for immediate attention
2. **Immediate Messaging for NJ Attorneys:** A special landing page link was created at the top of [www.njlap.org](http://www.njlap.org) with changeable messaging about the office closure, phone contact availability, and eventually it became the center point of communications about NJLAP’s growing online services. Messages of comfort and assurance were created and posted to this page, along with resource lists and stress management tips.
3. **NJSBA and several Bar Associations and Groups** helped get the word out by sharing the link to the special landing page
4. **Emails were sent out** to NJLAP groups and newsletter subscribers
5. **Zoom:** NJLAP obtained a HIPAA-compliant version, handling both meetings and webinars. Although NJLAP is not bound by HIPPAA compliance, there is not specific software that meets the 42CFR confidentiality requirements. We contracted for the HIPAA- compliant version to have additional security for general privacy protection for anyone either having a meeting with an NJLAP counselor or attending a webinar.
6. **Email communications:** NJLAP started sending twice weekly emails out to its mailing lists, with important information and reassurance. We reduced that to once weekly to balance being an important resource with not overwhelming subscribers with too many emails. The email is promoted on all social media, on the special landing page, and through posts on NJSBA’s community net pages. Currently, subscribers are close to 1,000 not including those who access the email through social media and sharing. A link for non-subscribers to read past issues is included on the special landing page.
7. **Webinars:** NJLAP hosted numerous webinars, including during Lawyer Well-Being Week in 2020 and 2021. Most webinars were recorded and are available on NJLAP’s YouTube Channel. Surveys automatically sent out at the end of the webinars have provided valuable feedback and additional subscribers to the e-newsletter. “Sponsors” of these webinars have promoted NJLAP, the webinar and other services to their members.
8. NJLAP participated with the **virtual exhibit hall** provided at NJSBA’s virtual annual meeting, and will be doing the same with NJAJ’s virtual exhibit halls. This particular exhibit hall included special zoom rooms for anyone “visiting” the virtual booth (webpage) to ask questions of NJLAP staff, in a private one-on-one break out room. In 2021, NJLAP staff presented 3 CLE sessions on Lawyer Well-Being at NJAJ events. Virtual presentations were also made to several law firms, specialty bar associations, Judges groups, and the NJ Attorney General’s office.
9. **Staff made occasional visits to the office**, with NJSBA permission and following CDC guidelines, to access files and software not accessible otherwise.

**Technology Proposal (in process)**

The ability to work offsite with secure laptops is an immediate concern. Currently staff is using personal computers at home, leaving the program vulnerable to confidentiality breaches, computer hacks, and other issues. an **RFP** has been prepared, describing what the program needs to upgrade to secure, standardized technology, as well as upgrading to a web-based office management system such as **Microsoft Teams**, or **Google Suite**. The use of personal cell phones to make client phone calls is problematic, not only because of purposeful or accidental reception (think baby monitors) of confidential calls, but also the risk of confidential names and phone numbers being exposed. It may be possible to create a secure partition on staff personal phones for business related phone calls and email access. If not, a more flexible offsite/onsite phone system, such as Ring Central is recommended.

**Update July 2021**

The NJLAP newsletter, **Balance** was increased to twice a week at the beginning of lock down, and as tensions and mental health concerns continued to be paramount, frequency was monitored. After assessing opens and click thrus, and realizing that attorneys were suffering email fatigue, the issues were reduced to once a week, then twice a month, and now, permanently once a month.

NJLAP contracted with **Ring Central** to provide a more flexible phone system, giving staff the ability to use a cell phone or internet app to directly handle calls when offsite, transfer calls between extensions.

New, secured laptops were purchased, and they serve as a staff member’s only computer. With cloud-based Microsoft 365 applications, including **One Drive**, staff can securely access work materials both onsite and offsite.

The less-formal **Quick Info** landing page link remains a popular source for information and will remain a part of the main page for the foreseeable future. Both in person and virtual programming and client evaluations have become permanent options, creating easier access to assistance for those located at inconvenient distances.

The enhanced **Strategic Communications** made necessary by the pandemic have allowed NJLAP to remain in touch with New Jersey Attorneys, Judges, Law Students, and Law Graduates, giving us additional exposure to with at least 10,000 touchpoints added. NJLAP is now operating on a hybrid staffing schedule and continuing to monitor the pandemic and its effects on Attorney Well-Being.

**Noreen Braman**

**NJLAP Program Communications & Technology Manager**

**August 2021**

**References:**

**Website** [**www.njlap.org**](http://www.njlap.org)

**Landing Page** [**https://mailchi.mp/4e426c4829b4/njlapmeetingcancel**](https://mailchi.mp/4e426c4829b4/njlapmeetingcancel)

**Balance Newsletter** [**https://us10.campaignarchive.com/home/?u=348abb8b1ff037a84f0bfb1f8&id=de2d48e33c**](https://us10.campaignarchive.com/home/?u=348abb8b1ff037a84f0bfb1f8&id=de2d48e33c)

**Youtube Channel** [**https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCb0KoTmDC2hZ3sZ0iS2vFIQ**](https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCb0KoTmDC2hZ3sZ0iS2vFIQ)

**Facebook** [**https://www.facebook.com/njlap**](https://www.facebook.com/njlap)

**Twitter** [**https://twitter.com/NJlap08901**](https://twitter.com/NJlap08901)

**NJLAP serves a population of 75,000 licensed attorneys in the state of New Jersey with 6 staff and is paid for by a $10 yearly assessment on attorney license renewals.**

**Mission Statement:**

**The New Jersey Lawyers Assistance Program is**

**the free and confidential resource assisting all**

**NJ Lawyers, Judges, Law Students, and Law Graduates**

**achieve and maintain personal and professional well-being.**