

Concerned for a Colleague? Confidential Help is Available!

Sarah Myers, Esq., LMFT, LAC



Most legal professionals in Colorado know that the Colorado Lawyer Assistance Program (COLAP) is here to help them with confidential support for any of their personal or career related issues with free consultations. But did you know that COLAP also provides support if you are concerned about a colleague? Due to COLAP's heightened level of confidentiality pursuant to Rule 254, we are a safe place for you to get help for colleagues (or family members) when you don't know where to turn.

When an individual is calling out of concern for a family member, colleague, or other member of the legal community, the expert consultation helps them clarify and understand the concerning behaviors they have been observing, receive education about signs and symptoms of behavioral health issues, and develop a plan for how to offer support to that person from a licensed professional. Often this entails coaching on how the caller can speak with the person they are concerned about in destigmatizing and deescalating language, and how to encourage the individual to call COLAP themselves to ask for help. Sometimes COLAP staff will confidentially reach out to the member of the legal community based on the information provided by the individual who initially contacted COLAP with the concern. In these cases, the identity of the caller remains confidential, and any contact COLAP makes with the member of the legal community is confidential.

There are times when a member of the legal community is concerned both about a colleague and a potential ethical issue, such as a duty to report. Since COLAP cannot give legal advice, in these cases we provide resources such as the Colorado Bar Association's ethics hotline so callers can get appropriate legal advice.

Whether you call COLAP for yourself or for someone you care about, discussion topics can include, but are not limited to behavioral health concerns including mental health, substance use, and/or addiction issues; stress from exposure to graphic evidence, unmanageable workload, overly contentious communications with opposing counsel, and case outcomes; professional, legal and ethical issues; grief and loss, medical and financial issues, and burnout; leadership and workplace culture issues; career-related issues including retirement and life transitions; and relationship and/or communication issues.

But if you are concerned for a colleague or someone you care about, consider these behaviors that might be signs someone is struggling:

- "Ghosting" or avoiding others.
- Disheveled appearance or compromised personal hygiene.
- Missed court appearances, appointments, or deadlines.
- Declining work product or tardiness.
- Confusion or difficulty focusing.
- Self-medicating with substances (drugs or alcohol) or processes (internet, shopping, gaming, gambling, etc.)
- Head or body aches; frequent illness.
- Physical or mental fatigue or falling asleep at inappropriate times.
- Expressing feelings of isolation, apathy, or depression.
- Expressing feelings of excessive overwhelm, anxiety or worry.

If it's appropriate, you can always address the person you are concerned about yourself. Some tips for a discussion include:

1. Let them know you care and want to listen. Explain why you are concerned, using examples of behaviors you have noticed.

2. Be prepared to hear difficult or upsetting things, but do not take anything said personally since this is about them, not you.

3. Limit any potential interruptions and be non-judgmental and patient. Do not blame the person for their situation, and do not diagnose, problem solve, or challenge their feelings. Instead, listen, ask clarifying questions, and seek to understand.

4. Do not promise confidentiality, especially if the person is thinking about harming themselves. If appropriate, offer to help them contact resources like COLAP for confidential assistance and a free consultation.

5. Dial 988 for the Crisis Services hotline if it is an urgent mental health crisis or the person is threatening suicide or dial 911 if it is a medical emergency or you don't feel safe.

If you are having a hard time starting a conversation, call COLAP and we will consult with you about the situation. Because COLAP has a heightened level of confidentiality, we cannot identify the concerned caller, and we cannot release any information about the person we reach out to. You can contact COLAP for yourself or a colleague at 303-986-3345 or info@coloradolap.org.



Sarah Myers is the Executive Director of the Colorado Lawyer Assistance Program (COLAP). COLAP is the free, confidential, and independent well-being program for the legal community of Colorado. For more information, go to www.coloradolap.org. For a confidential consultation, discussion about your stressors, or to obtain helpful resources, contact COLAP at 303-986-3345 or info@coloradolap.org.



Colorado Lawyer Assistance Program

(303) 986-3345 | info@coloradolap.org