

Mental Health First Aid Training for Lawyers At Sheraton Bay Point on 8/10/18

by Lisa A. Rahn

Suzanne Clark, MSW, LCSW is a licensed mental health professional in Panama City Beach, Florida. Inspired by her attorney uncle, she started her career as a legal secretary in Detroit, Michigan. Ms. Clark recently leveraged her prior legal experience by becoming one of the first facilitators in the country to offer Mental Health First Aid training specifically geared to lawyers.

Mental Health First Aid (MHFA) is an "8-hour course that uses role-playing and simulations to demonstrate how to offer initial help in a mental health crisis and connect persons to the appropriate professional, peer, social, and self-help care," according to the National Council for Behavioral Health (NCBH). Like CPR or First Aid, MHFA training prepares participants to respond to a person in crisis and keep them safe until the crisis is resolved or a professional can take over.

Ms. Clark has been certified as a MHFA Trainer since 2013 and a National Train the Trainer since 2016. Locally, she trained nearly 600 people (including educators, health department employees, and medical frontline staffers) in MHFA through a grant from the BP oil spill settlement. She also has provided Train the Trainer programs across Florida, and in Massachusetts, New Jersey and other states. She currently has continuing education approval for audiences as diverse as pharmacists, human resource professionals, and Florida nursing professionals from CNAs through ARNPs, Respiratory Therapists and Midwives.

Ms. Clark added MHFA for Lawyers to her offerings after participating in a training program two years ago with several lawyers for the



collaborative divorce process that she facilitates, as well. She realized that "like social workers, lawyers are interacting with people in crisis every day for eight hours or longer. Unlike social workers, their education does not include information on mental health, coping mechanisms, and self-care." Working in the legal field is highly stressful, often adversarial and antagonistic, and lawyers hate to lose cases. Stigma about mental health issues may cause lawyers not to seek help or to self-medicate through substance abuse.



In the January 2018 issue of "The Florida Bar Journal," Michael Higer, President of The Florida Bar Association, pointed out that "our justice system depends on the health and wellness of the lawyers who are the advocates for justice." He goes on to list sobering statistics about attorney mental health afflictions from a 2015 Florida Bar membership survey, including:

- 18 percent of lawyers, or double the number in the general population, have alcohol problems.

- 33 percent are diagnosed with a mental disorder.
- 19 percent have "high anxiety" disorders.
- Lawyers are 3.6 times as likely to suffer from depression as the general population.
- Lawyers are twice as likely to commit suicide as the general population.
- 70 percent of lawyers would change their careers if they could.

The Florida Bar Board of Governors created a Special Committee on Mental Health and Wellness of Florida Lawyers in July 2017 to "identify ways the Bar can destigmatize mental illnesses within our legal community and recommend practices to improve both the Bar's rules and programming." In addition, a new section on "Mental Health and Wellness" was added to the Florida Bar website (<https://www.floridabar.org/member/healthandwellnesscenter/>), the theme of the 2018 Florida Bar Annual Convention this month was "Health and Wellness," and mental health and substance abuse were added to continuing education requirements for lawyers (CLE).

Lawyers must complete 33 CLE hours every three years. MHFA training is approved for 9.5 CLEs.

Ms. Clark's next MHFA training for lawyers will take place at the Sheraton Bay Point in Panama City Beach from 8:00 am – 5:00 pm on Friday, August 10, 2018. The fee is \$179.00 and includes lunch. For more information and registration, go to <https://www.suzanneclark.org/cle-training>.

Ms. Clark also offers private trainings for groups of 15-30 participants, which can keep costs down. She can be reached at (850) 319-3828 or nwifcares@gmail.com.