



Eric Lang of Lang Legal in Atlanta. Courtesy photo

NEWS

'Shame on Us': Lawyer Hits Hard After Judge's Suicide

Following the suicide of a Georgia judge on the bench, Atlanta attorney Eric C. Lang of The Lang Legal Group is calling for a more tailored approach for addressing mental health in the legal industry.

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🕒 6 minute read



By Cedra Mayfield

Litigation Reporter

What You Need to Know

- Atlanta lawyer and mental health advocate Eric C. Lang calls for shift in legal profession's collective approach to mental health.
- Lang calls for increase in messaging, resources and support focused toward 20% of population that faces higher risks of mental health.
- Advocate share his reaction to recent suicide of late Judge Stephen R. Yekel to underscore need for revitalized legal wellness approach.

Following the suicide of a Georgia judge on the bench, Atlanta attorney Eric C. Lang of The Lang Legal Group is calling for a more tailored approach to addressing mental health in the legal industry.

As a mental health advocate candid about his own struggles that led to a suicide attempt in 2012, Lang emphasized the need for messaging, resources and support.

He also wants to differentiate between the roughly 20% of lawyers facing higher risks, as quantified by the National Institute of Mental Health, and the other 80%—to provide additional care to those on the precipice.

"I think that the work that's been done has taken us from 'nowhere' to 'everywhere,' but now that we're 'everywhere,' we need to dig in a little deeper," Lang told the Daily Report.

'We Missed It'



Judge Stephen R. Yekel of the State Court of Effingham County. Courtesy photo

More than a month after late Effingham County State Court Judge Stephen R. Yekel died by gunfire inside his courtroom in December, Lang took to LinkedIn to air his frustration about media coverage surrounding the jurist's suicide.

In the initial, unedited Jan. 30 post, Lang wrote that the Daily

Report "is usually excellent on these issues," before insinuating that its article's inclusion of suicide prevention resources had been insufficient.

"The last [two] paragraphs of the 20 paragraph article contained references to the State Bar of Georgia's excellent counseling program. #UseYour6," Lang wrote. "But there was no discussion in the body of the article of mental health."



Eric Lang · 2nd

Trial Attorney and Legal Strategist; Leading Speaker ...

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GEORGIA JUDGE KILLS HIMSELF IN HIS COURTROOM. NO ONE SEEMS TO CARE.

Judge Stephen Yekel, a Georgia State Court Judge, took a gun to his head while alone in his courtroom, on 12/30/24, the day before his term was to end as a result of losing a judicial election. When I learned of it, I was curious as to how the legal community, especially those that have professed concern about attorney mental illness/health, would react. Let me summarize for you: [if possible, here would be cricket noises].

[Cedra Mayfield](#), of ALM (Daily Report), who is excellent on these issues, was tasked only to write a piece called "Judge's Suicide Sparks Chatter Over Judicial Election." The last 2 paragraphs of the 20 paragraph article contained references to the [State Bar of Georgia's](#) excellent counseling program. [#UseYour6](#) But there was no discussion in the body of the article of mental health. <https://lnkd.in/egavn33b>

Law360's piece didn't touch ALM's for detail. Indeed, it was titled "Ga. Judge Dies by Apparent Suicide in Courtroom." Apparent, because the gun was laying next to him in an empty courtroom, and went off at just the right angle.

The [American Bar Association](#) was silent. Search "Yekel" on ABA Journal website (includes daily newsfeeds) and there is nothing. Same for the main site. (The [ABA Commission on Lawyer Assistance Programs](#) group is too busy taking reservations for their national conference in September 2024 and promoting their 2017 award winners.)

Go ahead and search lawyer mental health suicide yekel. You will get plenty of news coverage, and nothing about mental health.

Why?

Some will say that Judge Yekel killed himself as a result of a tough election loss. Near as I can tell from some quick reading, there are more than 5,000 judicial elections annually (but not 5,000 suicides). There's math out there for the existence of half a million elected officials nationwide. The losers do not take their own lives as a matter of course.

My cynical view is that Judge Yekel doesn't fit the profile of who some folks believe need to be helped. He was an older white male, and a Judge in a small community. Wasn't grinding for a big firm; wasn't caught up in the daily strain of city life; wasn't oppressed (BTW that was not sarcasm). He's a

"one off" and there's no profit in holding him up as an example.

Now for the second time in the last few months, let me say SHAME ON US. I don't know Judge Yekel, but whatever was in his brain about ending life was likely there long before he pulled the trigger. The issue is not that he took his own life (which I view as statistically insignificant) but that for a while he was likely to have been struggling with something, and we missed it. And, by not looking at this story as closely as we have looked at the flashier ones, the ones the consultants create fear (and sales) from, we're missing chances to learn.

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"Judge Stephen Yekel, a Georgia State Court Judge, took a gun to his head while alone in his courtroom, on 12/30/24, the day before his term was to end as a result of losing a judicial election. When I learned of it, I was curious as to how the legal community, especially those that have

professed concern [about] attorney mental illness/health, would react. Let me summarize for you: [if possible, here would be cricket noises]," Lang wrote. "My cynical view is that Judge Yekel doesn't fit the profile of who some folks believe need[ed] to be helped. He was an older white male, and a Judge in a small community. Wasn't grinding for a big firm; wasn't caught up in the daily strain of city life; wasn't oppressed ([By the way] that was not sarcasm). He's a 'one off' and there's no profit in holding him up as an example."

In addition to critiquing media coverage of Yekel's suicide, Lang also chastised the legal community as a whole.

"[L]et me say shame on us. I don't know Judge Yekel, but whatever was in his brain about ending life was likely there long before he pulled the trigger," Lang wrote. "The issue is not that he took his own life (which I view as statistically insignificant) but that for a while he was likely to have been struggling with something, and we missed it. And, by not looking at this story as closely as we have looked at the flashier ones, the ones the consultants create fear (and sales) from, we're missing chances to learn."

'Greater Focus on ... More at-Risk Group'

When reached for comment about the post, Lang told the Daily Report Yekel's suicide evoked personal feelings of empathy and curiosity.

"As someone who deals with mental health issues, that empathy becomes greater as I wonder what Judge Yekel was dealing with, as a participant in attorney mental health discussions," Lang said. "I was anxious to see how the rest of the attorney mental health community would react."

Disappointed with others' reactions, Lang highlighted his dissatisfaction in his LinkedIn post by challenging readers to, "search 'lawyer mental health suicide Yekel.'" According to Lang, the query would return "plenty of news coverage," but "nothing about mental health." Lang's post linked

the disassociation to the likelihood of others failing to have perceived Yekel as being a person in need of help prior to his suicide.

That's something Lang is advocating to change.

He pointed out that, while discussions, trainings and resources surrounding wellness in the legal profession have improved over the years, the messaging involved is largely tailored toward those who aren't already struggling to manage mental health issues.

"I just published a lengthy article on this subject. We've gone in the last 20 years from attorney mental health being viewed by the [American Bar Association] as an 'under the radar' issue to a place where, if not everyone, most everyone is educated that an issue exists," Lang said.

"We have to move on from throwing around scary numbers to tailoring our message to the two distinct audiences out there. The 'wellness' approach is an excellent message to the vast majority of the profession that is not dealing with mental health issues, but we need greater focus on the smaller and more at risk group, which I belong to, who do have mental health related issues."

Lang encouraged those who seek to educate on mental health issues in the legal profession to clearly differentiate between "what things we say are important for the 80% and what things we say are more important for the 20%."

Signs to Consider

In addition to acknowledging that the needs of those at lower and higher risks of mental health challenges tend to differ, Lang noted the importance of legal professionals learning to spot potential indicators early on.

"We need to be very focused on helping everyone recognize the real world signs that one might be in the 20%," Lang said.

Feelings of depression and thoughts of death are signs Lang said a person can self-detect as signals they might belong to the higher risk

group. However, Lang considered the cues to be "generic" and difficult for others to potentially observe, detect and support through intervention.

In hopes of increasing awareness, Lang suggested legal colleagues be mindful of active signs of mental health challenges ranging from changes in availability and communication to declines in productivity.

"Constant not returning calls, constant unavailability, missing deadlines, changes in work quality, things along those lines," Lang said.

By broadening conversations surrounding mental health in the legal profession, who all it impacts and how, Lang hoped to help support a collective shift in wellness training and support.

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