

Florida Lawyers Assistance, Inc. – There Is Help, and There Is Hope

Florida Lawyers Assistance, Inc. (FLA) is a lawyers-helping-lawyers program which offers confidential help to judges, attorneys, and law students dealing with alcohol and drug abuse problems, compulsive gambling, stress, depression, other types of compulsive disorders, and similar conditions which may impair these individuals' quality of life and ability to practice in a competent, ethical and professional manner. FLA was created in 1986 by recovering attorneys and addiction professionals in order to help other lawyers deal with their impairments. The backbone of FLA is a network of over 200 attorneys throughout the State of Florida who are themselves recovering from substance abuse, psychological problems, and impairment caused by other conditions. These volunteers stand ready to assist their peers in all areas of their recovery. The staff and volunteers of FLA *know* the problems faced by impaired attorneys and how to help overcome these problems because they've been there.

Because of the sensitive nature of addiction and psychological problems, attorneys who may be in need of help are often very reluctant to seek that assistance. Recognizing this concern and in order to foster early and confidential contact with FLA, in 1986 the Supreme Court of Florida approved Rule 3-7.1(j) which states that any treatment provided to an impaired attorney shall be deemed confidential and may not be admitted as evidence in any disciplinary proceeding. In 1998, the Florida Legislature adopted §397.482-486, F.S. providing confidentiality for any voluntary communications made to FLA.

Among the confidential services provided by FLA are:

- Assessment and Referral:** A trained member of the FLA staff will meet with an affected attorney, either at FLA's Ft. Lauderdale office or off-site, to evaluate the problem and recommend available treatment and rehabilitation options.
- Interventions:** In appropriate situations, a member of the FLA staff will plan, rehearse, and facilitate a formal intervention to assist an impaired attorney.
- Peer Support Network:** The affected attorney will be paired with a recovering lawyer in their geographical area to act as a mentor and to help with their rehabilitation.
- Attorney Support Meetings:** FLA sponsors over 30 weekly meetings around the state where recovering attorneys network to help each other deal with the problems and stresses of practicing law without having to resort to using substances or engaging in self-destructive behavior.
- Education and Prevention:** FLA works with law firms, the courts, The Florida Bar, and the Florida Board of Bar Examiners to educate members of those entities concerning attorney impairment and recovery. In addition, FLA makes regular presentations at CLE seminars and law schools throughout the state regarding addiction and mental health issues.
- Annual Workshop:** FLA presents a CLE seminar in July of each year dealing with such issues as recent developments in the treatment of various impairments, disciplinary proceedings in which lawyer impairment was involved, and Board of Bar Examiners and Supreme Court decisions and procedures concerning admission of applicants with histories of chemical dependency or psychological problems.
- Structured Rehabilitation Program:** In cases involving attorney discipline or admissions problems, FLA can implement a structured rehabilitation program which will document an attorney's or law student's recovery. Such evidence of recovery will often be taken into consideration by The Florida Bar or Board of Bar Examiners when determining discipline or recommendations for admission.

Facts About Impairment

- Addiction and depression are treatable illnesses.
- Addiction and depression occur in every socioeconomic group. It has been estimated that their prevalence within certain professions (including attorneys) may be higher than in the general population.
- Alcohol is the most widely used and destructive drug in America. Alcohol abuse among women has doubled in recent years. Previously the ratio of women alcoholics to men was 1 to 6; it is now 1 to 3.
- Marijuana is not a “benign” drug. It severely affects memory, concentration, and ambition.
- Complications associated with the use of cocaine include damage to the heart, brain, and other major organs. Continued use causes dramatic personality changes and deterioration of ethical values, leading to criminal and disciplinary penalties.
- More than 400,000 Floridians suffer from gambling addiction.
- One of the symptoms of addiction is denial - an individual who is addicted usually has little or no insight into their problem.
- 35% to 50% of disciplinary cases can be traced to an underlying impairment.
- Early intervention and treatment of the addicted attorney often leads to complete recovery.

Addiction is not a moral issue, but rather is a treatable illness which causes a deterioration of moral and ethical values. The stigma is not in having the illness, but in **failing to seek treatment once its presence is recognized**. Seeking treatment is perfectly acceptable social behavior. Addiction is a progressive disease - it never gets better by itself.

Free, confidential help is available to you or a lawyer you know who may be having problems with drugs, alcohol, gambling, or a psychological condition which is impairing the ability to practice law or live life. If you or someone you care about is suffering from such a problem, professional and peer assistance is available to help bring about a positive change.

FLORIDA LAWYERS ASSISTANCE CAN HELP.

For Additional Information

Call the FLA Hotline or visit the FLA web site:

(800) 282-8981

www.fla-lap.org