

Federal Judicial Center
Off Paper Episode 18:
A Community of Caring:
Wellness in U.S. Probation and Pretrial Services

Mark Sherman: From the Federal Judicial Center in Washington D.C., this is *Off Paper*. I'm Mark Sherman.

Before we get started, I want to provide an update. A lot has happened since we recorded this episode toward the end of last year that's important to talk about. I'm talking with Shelly Easter, producer of *Off Paper*. Hey, Shelly.

Shelly Easter: Hey, Mark. As you said, a lot has happened over the last few weeks. But what's happened recently?

Mark Sherman: Officer suicides are not unheard of in our system. Over the last four years there's been at least one officer suicide each year. Sadly and really quite shockingly just a couple of weeks ago, on New Year's Day, a U.S. probation officer killed his wife and then himself. I mean it should go without saying that law enforcement work, whether it be more traditional policing or probation and pretrial services, is stressful even under the best of circumstances. But the pandemic, the recent civil unrest, and the violent behavior from right-wing extremists we've been observing have added greatly to the issue making it that much more important that officers be aware of their own mental health, check in on themselves and their colleagues, know where to get help if they need it, and

develop the ability to be resilient. And when I say officer, I'm talking about everyone from the chief on down.

Shelly Easter: So, Mark, can you tell us a little bit about what today's episode is about?

Mark Sherman: Yeah. So I talked with a number of officers about these issues in getting ready for the podcast. And you'll hear from them too. But this conversation is with Melinda Torres Felix, a supervisory U.S. Probation Officer who chairs the Federal Probation and Pretrial Services' National Wellness Committee. We discussed issues surrounding officer wellness and the resources and programs out there to address them. But one of the biggest takeaways I think is that it is imperative for officers to know that asking for help for themselves or others is not a sign of weakness and will not hurt their or their colleagues' careers. Indeed, knowing how to be resilient is a competency that can be learned.

Shelly Easter: Well, I'm looking forward to hearing about it. Let's get going.

Mark Sherman: Let's do it. Probation and pretrial services officer's jobs come with a lot of stress. From pretrial investigation and supervision to presentence investigation, officers are exposed to varying degrees of trauma as they read law enforcement reports, interview victims, and assess the criminal and social histories of those involved in

sometimes unspeakable crimes. Officers often internalize client's trauma which in turn can lead to maladaptive coping strategies and serious physical and mental health problems, even suicide. This is Monica Mannino, supervisory U.S. Probation Officer in the eastern district of Missouri and vice chair of the National Wellness Committee.

Mark Sherman: Okay. Monica, are you there?

Monica Mannino: I am.

Mark Sherman: Good. Okay. I want to just get your observations about what's been happening in the system. Why do you think it's become such an issue recently?

Monica Mannino: I think that, as a whole, the number of law enforcement officers as well as the number of probation and pretrial services staff that is dying by suicide is alarming. I think that when you see those numbers, you have to correlate and wonder is it something to do with the demands of the job, is it something to do with the ability to take care of yourself or not to take care of yourself.

Mark Sherman: Research has consistently demonstrated that human services professionals, like probation and pretrial officers, are impacted by the traumatic experiences of those they serve. Do you feel like the job has gotten harder?

Monica Mannino: The amount of programming is different. The amount of responsibility for officers becomes different I

think. In our district, the number of precinct investigation reports that are coming down have increased dramatically. I think caseloads are going up. When you're looking at what is required on each case that an officer has, that's pretty demanding.

Mark Sherman: The use of evidence-based supervision practices has dramatically shifted the role of the officer from monitoring client compliance with release conditions to an active agent in the behavioral change process. To do this well, officers must have compassion and empathy for their clients and they must also have compassion for themselves.

As the officer ranks have become more diverse, other important wellness issues have risen especially for nonwhite officers, women, and those in the LGBTQ community.

Tiffany Vega: It didn't even dawn on me that I was doing something that would be working against my wellness or my wellbeing. I assumed I'd always be closeted.

Johnny Alexander: I'm not speaking for the entire general population of officers who are LGBTQ. But to me, to be an African-American male *and* to be a member of LGBTQ community, those are two separate wellness issues that also can be challenging.

Mark Sherman: That was U.S. Probation Officer Tiffany Vega of the Northern District of Illinois and U.S. Probation Officer Johnny Alexander of the Western District of Kentucky.

In this episode of *Off Paper*, we explore what officers, probation and pretrial offices, and the system as a whole need to be healthy and resilient and what wellbeing means.

Melinda Torres Felix: I went to the Federal Law Enforcement Training Center and I got certified as a fitness coordinator. I came back and I was making everyone do sprints, and sit ups, and all those things. I quickly learned that is not what wellness is. It's part of it. It's part of the eight dimensions of wellness.

Mark Sherman: That was Melinda Torres Felix, chair of the U.S. Probation and Pretrial Services Wellness Committee.

Wellness isn't just an officer issue. Leaders also play a critical role. According to a 2018 report from the Office of the Community Oriented Policing Services at the U.S. Department of Justice, the lack of leadership in law enforcement organizations has perpetuated a culture of silence around mental health issues contributing to fatalities, substance abuse, and heart disease.

Here are chiefs Wade Warren of the District of North Dakota and Melissa Alexander of the Middle District of North Carolina.

Wade Warren: We have to find a way to get people to understand that, that prevention is huge and that the services are just a way to, they're probably a maintenance for us to do the job and finding a way for it to be a little bit more okay or common place like going to the chiropractor.

Melissa Alexander: One of the things I was most excited to see in terms of the changes to the SF-86 was it says seeking or receiving mental health care for personal wellness may contribute *favorably* to decisions about a person's eligibility for employment. The message that taking care of yourself includes taking care of your mental health in a way that's proactive. A way that's going to enhance your ability to do this job is really the message to focus on.

Mark Sherman: Across the system many districts are engaging in similar efforts while at the national level a robust national committee has been leading overall efforts with the support of the Administrative Offices of the U.S. Courts, Probation and Pretrial Services office and the FJC. Stay with us.

Melinda Torres Felix is a supervisory probation officer in the Northern District of Illinois. She chairs the U.S. Probation and Pretrial Wellness Committee and she's here to talk to us about the work of the committee and the wellness movement underway in the system. Melinda, welcome to *Off Paper*.

Melinda Torres Felix: Thank you. Thank you so much for having me on the show today.

Mark Sherman: I want to begin by exploring with you the nature of probation and pretrial work. You've been in the system for a number of years as both an officer and supervisor. How has officer's work changed over time? In your view, what has been the impact on officers' health and wellness?

Melinda Torres Felix: Yes, I have been in the system for over 17 years now. I started off as a probation officer assistant and moved to supervision post conviction officer. I worked as a specialist with very challenging caseload and now as a supervisor. So everything has evolved from the moment that I started working for the system and all for the better. It has made the work that we do so much more meaningful and impactful.

When I first started as a post-conviction officer, we had 60, 70 people. Your job was to see them each month and make sure people are working and following those guidelines back then. But evidence-based practices have been around for a while and then they came into our system. We are very fortunate to have these core correctional practices that we can implement and customize our supervision to those that we supervise, but with that comes new challenges. We're learning new skills and we are getting a lot closer to those that we serve as we've customized that supervision for them. But that means when something

happens, if someone is revoked, we take it more personal because we work with them a lot closer than we have in the past.

Mark Sherman: So what do you think that means in terms of wellness and sort of managing wellness for managers and leaders as well as for those who support the probation and pretrial mission in a district?

Melinda Torres Felix: It is our job as peers and as leaders in this agency to foster opportunities to work on their wellness. You can see that now a lot of districts have a wellness program. They're hearing the staff, all levels of the staff because everyone is - like you said - faced with new jobs. Essentially, everyone's job has changed. And that's what we do, right? We evolve to be better. So we need to evolve in the system with their wellness and customize what we're doing in district to support the people who are on the line doing that meaningful impactful work and being leaders of change.

Mark Sherman: One of the consistent themes in the literature about issues of law enforcement officer health and wellness has been this culture of fear and secrecy surrounding discussions of officer mental health and mental health treatment, substance use, that sort of thing.

Is it true from what you have observed historically in probation and pretrial? If you could talk about what's being done about it.

Melinda Torres Felix: Sure. Absolutely. In this agency, if you're an officer, you have an investigation done just to get your foot in the door to work here. Then there is a reinvestigation every five years. During that investigation, in the past there are questions about what kind of professional health you have gotten. In law enforcement there is a stigma around that because people are afraid to have those conversations or to go get the help they need because they're afraid they're not going to be seen as fit for duty or be able to qualify with the weapon. Someone is going to question their mental health because they went in and got help.

I'm very proud and very happy to say that I work for a system where that's changing. The big change that's come into place is the SF-86, which is that background investigation. The questions have changed. Now, you only have to answer certain questions. If you answer yes to this certain group of questions, you don't have to go further.

I've had people who have said that an investigator has come in and maybe they got grief counseling, or counseling for a divorce, or whatever it is. This person who is a non-trained professional has come in and really grilled them on these questions and maybe something they've dealt with in therapy. They've opened these wounds that they have put away. On the other side, people have not wanted to go and get help because

they are afraid that they're going to have to answer these questions, or they have heard these horror stories of investigations and what others have been probed for.

So I'm really proud to work in an agency that has made a systematic change like this. It's very important in our national committee and my local committee that this word is getting out there. That people know that this has changed. That, in fact, going out and seeking professional help is seen as healthy and part of the resiliency and the core competency that we should have in this agency.

Mark Sherman: I appreciate you mentioning the core competency because, when the Federal Judicial Center was working with our advisory committee on probation and pretrial education, we went through multiple drafts of competencies. What was interesting was that, as we were going through sort of the final drafts of the competencies, a couple of our advisory committee members said you know there is nothing among these competencies that talks about officer wellness. I remember sitting around the table with the advisory committee as we were going through these final drafts and everybody was kind of struck by that.

So we kind of went back a little bit to the drawing board and developed a couple of competencies that address issues of wellness. One of them is resilience. So we have a competency on resilience and several associated behaviors with that

competency. Then we have another sort of related competency that we call workload management. Have you seen any sort of evolution among folks in looking at it in a broader way?

Melinda Torres Felix: When I started the wellness committee in my district, it was a fitness committee. I went to the Federal Law Enforcement Training Center and I got certified as a fitness coordinator. I came back and I was making everyone do sprints and sit ups and all those things. I quickly learned, and this is 11 years ago, that that is not what wellness is. It's a part of it. It's part of the eight dimensions of wellness, but there's so much more to it. You know that wellness is mind, body, and soul. So I'm seeing that. I see that in my district and I'm seeing that across the nation. People are really digging deeper to provide staff with wellness resources that are going to help, really, really help them at whatever it is they need at whatever level.

Mark Sherman: What's happening at the national level and how both national and district efforts are working together to transform the system when we come back.

Jennifer Richter: How are you managing your health and wellness during this pandemic? And does that question itself stress you out?

I'm Jennifer Richter, host of a new podcast episode for improving mental health, increasing personal and professional

productivity, and fostering happiness in yourself and those around you. In this episode, I talked with two experts about actionable steps we can all take to face our challenges head on and to achieve a better sense of balance. You can find this episode, *Managing Our Health and Wellness During COVID-19 and Beyond*, on the COVID-19 educational resources page on fjc.dcn. Or, if you subscribe to *Off Paper* through your podcast provider, you'll find it listed as a special bonus episode. 2020 doesn't have to be a throwaway year. It can be a chance to reset, rethink and retool our coping strategies, and to refocus on what matters most. Give it a listen. It might just make your day.

Mark Sherman: The National Wellness Committee has become a pretty vibrant force. Could you tell us about the work of the committee?

Melinda Torres Felix: The committee started in 2007. It was a reaction. It was very sad. Someone at the Probation and Pretrial Services Administration died of suicide. In response to that, a steering group was created with six members. It was quickly learned that we needed a lot more than six people on this committee. There were a lot of different areas and projects that needed to get worked on. So it's been nice to have the support of the Administrative Office. It's been nice to partner up with chiefs that are doing amazing things in their districts. And it's been great to partner up with the FJC.

So where we are today, I came on in 2014 and we still have three of those original members on our committee but there is now 11 of us. We cover all levels of staff across the nation. Everyone comes with different expertise to the committee. We are making sure that everyone is able to tackle something when it comes to the eight dimensions so that, when a district needs assistance, we're there and we can provide that support or lead them in the right direction to have that support.

Mark Sherman: You guys are now involved in multiple other initiatives. I just wanted to ask you to elaborate on what some of those other things are.

Melinda Torres Felix: Sure. A major thing that we accomplished was creating electronic learning modules. We have six of them that you can find on the JNET. I know the FJC does a good job of connecting people to it through their website as well. We've covered topics such as stress and resiliency, secondary trauma, suicide prevention awareness, to managing your wellness and fitness and nutrition. We've created a casualty assistance guide which is a written operational framework for casualty assistance in the event of a serious injury or death of an agency employee, which is of course something we hope does not get deployed but we had to create it in case that we need it.

We have helped out with critical incident stress management. We've deployed assistance teams in times of need. We did this with the hurricanes in Puerto Rico and the Virgin Islands. We have done this for districts that have called up and don't currently have assistance teams and had needed assistance connecting for various reasons, whether it was suicide that occurred in that district, or just as recently as events that happened with the death of George Floyd. So we were able to provide them with connections to get that assistance as well.

We have done our first wellness conference back in 2018, which was the first of its kind for our system and something we're so proud of. We tackled so many different topics. More importantly we gave staff the opportunity to go to this conference and spend three days just practicing seeing themselves and their wellness, and giving them tools to take back to their district so they can hopefully implement them there.

We have provided presentations before. But now, because of this virtual environment, we're able to do it in a larger scale. So districts that have reached out we've been able to provide whatever training that they need, whether it's suicide prevention and awareness or just what's going on with the committee and what we can do.

A major thing we are able to do in the past two months is launch our wellness website which is also housed on the JNET. It's a great place for districts to go to and connect with other districts. They can find the point of contact for who the wellness committee leaders are or their critical incidence stress management team leads as well. They can find presentations.

We have a lot of talent in our system and a lot of wellness experts in our system, so they can go and find all that information there. We keep current with everything that's going on. We post it there. We also have our *Wellness Wisdom* newsletter that people could subscribe to and get a quarterly newsletter with some information on wellness. We like to focus the bullets on what's going on in different districts so that people can kind of get ideas of what's going on and hopefully bring that back to their districts.

Mark Sherman: This is Monica Mannino, supervisory U.S. probation officer in the eastern district of Missouri and vice chair of the National Wellness Committee.

Monica Mannino: This is one of the things I like the most. Every one of us on the committee has a different topic, or category, or subject that we are really passionate about. So we are offering our proposal, or our project, or our specialty to other districts so that we can provide training to them on

various wellness topics. That's offering them free training all about wellness. Also, like in a time of COVID when we're not all seeing each other very often, it can bring some cohesiveness when you're trying to do some these trainings like that. So that's another thing that we offer.

Another place that we're kind of excited to do is to just build that database as to what we can offer to other districts. In December, this is another thing that's kind of big, too, for the committee in where we go, but in December the committee will be trained on peer support. That peer support is going to be specific to probation and pretrial staff. So it's going to really equip us with an effective peer support program which we can promote to other individuals. It's going to give us the knowledge and skills necessary to help districts across the country and to either evolve their own critical incidence stress management team or to be able to deliver some peer support if the organization needs it.

So I think that's where we're going. We have some ideas to create a wellness app. We're working on that. We're working on it for suicide prevention. Again, this is what drives me, is the suicide prevention. This is my passion. It's really exciting to know that as a country, as an agency, as the whole, we are actually looking at finding a 24-hour seven-day-a-week hotline that will be staffed by a law enforcement officer of

some sort that will be available for probation and pretrial services officers in the need of crisis or when they want to talk to somebody.

Right now there is a 1-800 hotline and they do that. A 1-800 number that is manned by retired law enforcement officers. They include probation, and pretrial, and parole officers across the country. We are going to hope to tap into them and see how we can use them as a support for us so that our staff know that they're available and that it's confidential. Because anybody that you can reach out to when you're feeling suicidal, you're going to reach out to. We want to be able to provide that service to them.

Mark Sherman: Perhaps *the* major source of training in our system is the Federal Probation and Pretrial Academy.

Melinda, can you tell us about the wellness committee's collaboration with the Federal Probation and Pretrial Academy.

Melinda Torres Felix: The nice thing about being at the academy is that we weigh in on what's going on at the academy. They do work with new officers to talk to them about wellness and to show them the ELMs, but to have real conversations with them as well. That's so important for people to get in the beginning of their careers. A lot of companies and agencies don't do that, so getting in to this job it's so important. It's so meaningful. But, like you talked about, it can come

with some stress. So knowing that upfront and being prepared on ways to deal with that is so important. We're very, very lucky to have a good working relationship with the academy.

Pre-pandemic we would have meetings there. It was nice because we were able to speak to the different instructors there and they would float ideas on wellness with the committee. It's just a really good collaboration, so we're very fortunate to have that ability to do that.

Mark Sherman: We're going to take a short break. When we return, I'll ask Melinda Torres Felix about the impact of COVID-19 on officer health and wellness. I'll also ask her about the increasing emphasis on diversity inclusion and equity in the system and whether it makes sense to consider those issues in terms of officer wellness. You're listening to *Off Paper*.

Hey, folks, resiliency is a core competency that can be learned. The first step is knowing where to go and what to do when you or a colleague needs help. Retired law enforcement officers can provide immediate assistance through 1-800-COPLINE and someone is always available at the national suicide hotline at 1-800-273-8255. Trained crisis counselors can also be reached by texting NAMI to 741-741. The text line is a service provided by the National Alliance on Mental Illness. You'll find links to other wellness resources to include a downloadable

resource quick guide on the *Off Paper* page for this episode on fjc.dcn. Don't forget to take care of yourself and your colleagues while you're taking care of everyone else. Wellness is everyone's business. Stay healthy and stay well.

Melinda, our country and our world are really being tested by the challenges presented by the coronavirus and COVID-19. So how is this affecting officers and officer wellbeing? How is the wellness committee addressing it?

Melinda Torres Felix: Very, very important topic to talk about, right? There is a pandemic. There are school closures. There is the fight against racial injustice. There is the climate crisis. There is political uncertainty. Then you bring in all the other every day stressors that people normally have. It's a lot. I don't know too many people who can say they absolutely have no stress, or anxiety, or feeling depressed in a certain way at any certain point in time.

So I think one thing that's really important and something I know I speak to, to those that I work with here in the office is that we have to see people. We have to be open. We have to understand that everyone is in a different place right now and some people aren't themselves right now. So it's just very important that we come at it from a place like that.

As the committee, we are doing everything we possibly can. We have been finding and providing as many resources as we can

on wellness. After the death of George Floyd, we also did the same thing with diversity and inclusion issues and anything around that. We were taking suggestions and bringing them to the administrative office. They were doing an amazing job of making sure that they are passing that information to chiefs so that chiefs and deputies could have those resources and be able to bring that back. We've also done everything we can to keep the website updated with all those resources. That's why it's so important to make sure that the website is launched just right now in this environment because it is really needed.

Mark Sherman: You sort of ticked off a bunch of different things that are all happening at the same time. I want to take an opportunity just to kind of drill down with you thinking about issues of diversity, inclusion, equity as a wellness issue. For example, if they are in the LGBTQ community, to not be out and have to be closeted.

Earlier in the program you heard the voices of officers Tiffany Vega and Johnny Alexander. Officer Vega is Asian-American and gay. Officer Alexander is African-American and gay. Here is some more of what they had to say about their experiences. First, Officer Vega.

Tiffany Vega: I entered the system closeted in a pretty conservative part of our country. I was born in South Korea and adopted as an infant. I was raised in Boise, Idaho actually,

which is a predominantly white community. So I bring some different things, kind of, to that equation. But when I entered the federal system, I was closeted as a result of being raised in an environment and in a social arena that didn't affirm the LGBTQ community. Not only did they not affirm it, but I was raised in an environment that spoke against it.

So, as an adult after struggling to find that identity for myself as a woman of color, you know, I just assumed that I'd always be closeted. I wasn't closeted in my personal life. I was closeted in my professional life and I had no idea. Truly, when I was offered the job and I was going through the hiring process and I started that first year, it didn't even dawn on me that I was doing something that would be working against my wellness or my wellbeing. It was not even an option for me to think about let alone act on to be doing anything else. So it was an interesting experience because, for those that knew me on a more personal level that also happened to be working in the district, they could see that disconnect I guess.

Again, one of my early mentors kind of came up alongside me and said, hey, Tiff, what do you think about coming out? I was just like, oh my god, what do you know? Why would I do that? At that time I was the only officer of color and I was the only person that I knew of in the LGBTQ community that was in the district office. So I was just like, no, that would be totally

putting a target on my back and that's not something I want. That's not why I took this job.

Mark Sherman: Now here is Officer Alexander.

Johnny Alexander: The experience was unique for me. I'm coming from D.C., at the Federal Government Law Enforcement Agency, where D.C. is a very diverse city. The agency that I worked for was very diverse and inclusive. Not just the employees but there were actually openly LGBT employees there as well.

When I moved to Kentucky, there was a big difference because it's a conservative state versus D.C. So I was kind of hesitant to be myself at a point I was just kind of hiding. I just couldn't be closeted because it wasn't me. I wasn't giving 100 percent of my true character. So I didn't have any mental health issue, nothing like that, because I always had a support system. But my support system was mainly in D.C. So I would just call them any time I had any wellness issue as far as how to connect with folks, how to stop alienating myself, as far as being a loner or just not feeling part of the team, just I won't say feeling weird, but just to feel inclusive.

So I came up to my chief and I said, hey, I think it's a great idea if we develop a diversity and inclusion committee. I think this would be a great way of not just officers learning about the diversity and inclusion amongst the different

populations of supervision, of offenders and defendants. I thought it would be a great opportunity for the officers to learn about the different diversity and inclusion issues regarding not just involved individuals but also just employees who maybe members of different diversity and cultures and so case in point - myself.

So during the five months I planned a LGBT watch and learn session. That was in June of 2019. It was titled *LGBT Challenges of the supervised Population*. So now not only have we spoken about some of the challenges from just supervising but also spoke on some of the challenges based on what I see that's working as a member of the LGBT community when working with not just employees but also with the system overall. It was well-received. From that point on, I think that gave me confidence. I just wanted to be authentic and just to totally come out to the district. Based on that presentation alone, just being in that room presenting, I think people were open. They were receptive to learning about the challenges amongst the population. It got some really good feedback.

My biggest support was from officers who actually came out to me that I did not know. One officer came up to me and said that she is bisexual. Another officer came to me and said that she's a lesbian. So from that presentation alone I ended up connecting with other officers that became supportive to me

since I didn't have any officer in Kentucky as a role model exactly that I could be connected to because mainly my support system was in D.C.

I'm also an African-American male. So when the African-American male in me -- and I'm only speaking for me, I'm not speaking for the entire general population of officers who are LGBTQ. But to me, just being an African-American male *and* just being a member of LGBTQ community, I know there's two separate wellness issues that also can be challenging. When I first came to the district, there weren't that many minorities there. When I first came, the deputy chief was African-American but I was the only African-American male there in our office. Then they hired another African-American male the following year. But I was able to connect with an African-American officer who is a woman. She was really supportive of me. But at times she wasn't at work, I was the only person of color in the office. I felt disconnected. It's kind of hard to be myself. I wouldn't say that I was walking on eggshells, but it was kind of hard to make that connection.

Mark Sherman: Melinda, how is the wellness committee addressing these types of issues across the diversity inclusion and equity spectrum?

Melinda Torres Felix: If people can't be their authentic self at work and bring who they are to work in a safe and

accepting environment, it's absolutely going to affect their wellness. We know this. The research shows us this. As a committee, we are always trying, again, to touch on all the aspects of wellness. But after the death of George Floyd, committee members reached out and started having those conversations and being real and being honest. It was through those conversations that we talked about what can we do, and what can we do to support others in the system who maybe feeling this way or any certain type of way and how can we be part of the change.

So we definitely made sure that we could find all the appropriate resources that we could find and make sure that we were sharing those with the different leadership teams and offering our opinions. We had conversations with the administrative office about how we felt and what we felt needed to be done. And we were heard. We were definitely heard. The administrative office is working on all those things right now. There have been various panels and conversations like that where this comes out. This topic comes up and I think it's very important that it is addressed and talked about. Again, people are able to listen and hear if that's what they want to do. But also for those who want to speak and be heard, for them to be able to do that as well. This is the great thing about our

system, is that we're able to take these things and bridge them with other areas.

Speaking of my district, I'm very fortunate to have a really progressive diversity and inclusion committee where we are tackling on the subjects that haven't been talked about before but should have. We are making sure that people are feeling respected and included, and that they can be themselves at work. For those who want to listen, that's great. For those who want to talk, we want to hear what you have to say and what can we do to make things better.

Mark Sherman: What do you think the committee would like officer wellness to look like five years from now or even more?

Melinda Torres Felix: I don't even know if I can go five years. I think we have such a long list for this year because we want to hit things at rapid speed. That's what I love about this committee, that it's like, go, let's do it and let's do it all right now. The talent on this committee can get it done, which is really important. But some of our goals for 2021 are to fill a part-time temporary duty position for wellness so that we have someone who can dedicate more time than we're able to right now to get some of our projects done.

We are looking into researching and thinking about developing a wellness app so that we can empower staff to take control of their own wellness. We are always wanting to whether

this is one year or it's going to be something every year for the next billion years. We're always wanting to increase suicide awareness among staff. We're seeing what we can do to provide more resources with that. We were supposed to host our second annual conference which got canceled or postponed because of COVID. So we are working on that and we are working on doing a winter wellness workshop virtually because we hope to not be in this environment still this winter. But we're facing the reality of that just might be the case.

We want to continue to support the inclusion of language and the judiciary strategic plan that underscores the judiciary commitment to health and wellness of staff. We want to expand our resources. We want to provide training to local districts on the various wellness topics surrounding the eight dimensions of wellness. We are working on some more certifications for members of the committee so we can continue to evolve and provide the best services to districts in the nation.

Mark Sherman: Before we go, you had mentioned the work that the committee is doing on suicide prevention. That's an issue on our system. We recently lost an officer. So to the degree you can describe more work the committee wants to do on the area of suicide prevention, I think that would be helpful for folks to hear.

Melinda Torres Felix: I think, for the committee, it's really important to not be reactive but to be proactive. When it comes to suicide prevention, you don't know who they are right. You don't know what you'd say that might have just changed that one person's mind. So that's why it's so important why we're still passionate about getting as many resources as possible, and speaking to everyone that we possibly can, and providing a place for people to feel valued and heard and know that we care, and to help them not make that decision. So it's a focal point. It's why we were created. We know that we were created in response to one, but it's not how we move forward. We move forward proactively and we change the narrative.

Mark Sherman: Do you see a correspondence there in terms of developing a culture of care within a district to care for the people, meaning the officers and staff within that district or that office, but then how that translates to how we work with people in the community?

Melinda Torres Felix: Absolutely. I think it's very important to the community to take the taboo away from suicide. There had been times when people say someone suddenly died and we're saying they died of suicide. We're not using the term committed because of sometimes the connotation that comes with it. So they died of suicide and saying it out loud, and having those conversations, and providing people with the resources,

and doing that and giving people a platform to know that they're valued and cared when they're having those hard situations, when they're pouring everything in to their caseload, when they're stressed out because something happened on their caseload. It's through no fault of their own because they did everything that they're supposed to do and above and beyond. But we can't control human behavior, so it just happens sometimes.

So by districts, letting people know that we acknowledge the work that they do and we're providing resources so they continue to do the work that we do, that's a win. I'll say it again; you throw as much as you can at someone. If you can get something to stick to one person, then you've done your job because you've helped that one person and maybe that one person that needed the help the most.

Mark Sherman: When you're taking care of yourself, you're taking care of your clients, right? You're taking care of the community. It's just, again, very gratifying and exciting to hear about the work of the committee and the work that you're doing. That there are so many districts that are on board, that the Administrative Office also is on board. It's a difficult moment for everybody right now in our system and beyond and certainly for the clients that officers serve.

Melinda Torres Felix: Yeah. And, Mark, if I could just add that, yes, this job can be stressful but, boy, it is

rewarding. The work we do it's so meaningful. If we change lives for the better, we help people not just get through the process with our offices but through the system in general to not come back, to have long-term positive changes in their life. When you do that and when you see that with a client, someone you supervise, it is so meaningful. I see it when people retire from this office. They are proud and they are so grateful for the work that they did.

So it's important to note that this job got so many positives. It is so important and so impactful. We as staff members, as officers, whatever your position in the agency, wellness is your responsibility. You have to take ownership of it and take advantage of the resources that are out there, because what's the point, if they're there and you're not utilizing them. You're not doing yourself a service.

Mark Sherman: Well, Melinda Torres Felix, thank you so much for taking the time to talk with us.

Melinda Torres Felix: Thank you for letting me be here today.

Mark Sherman: *Off Paper* is produced by Shelly Easter. The program is directed by Craig Bowden and edited by Chris Murray. Our program coordinator is Anna Glouchkova.

Oh, and here's a reminder. If you're a U.S. probation or pretrial services officer, take a few minutes to check out the

wellness resources available on the Probation and Pretrial Services section of the JNET. And don't forget to listen to *Managing Our Health and Wellness During COVID-19 and Beyond*. You can find the program on the fjc.dcn COVID-19 educational resources page. I think you'll like it. If you subscribe to *Off Paper*, it'll also appear as a bonus episode wherever you get your podcast.

I'm Mark Sherman. Thanks for listening. See you next time.

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