

NY Judge's Suspected Suicide Shines Light on Silent Struggle

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Austin lawyer Seana Willing remembers looking forward to her meeting with Mack Kidd, a well-regarded Texas appellate court judge who had arranged to meet with her on a Monday morning in 2005.

But Willing, the [former head of the State Commission on Judicial Conduct](#) who often met with judges who wanted to discuss ethical dilemmas, would never find out why Kidd wanted to meet. He took his own life the previous day.

“The odd thing was ... I didn’t know how he died until his ceremony,” said Willing, who considered Kidd, a justice on Austin’s Third Court of Appeals, a friend. “Then I saw all of these people speak about him and it became apparent that he had taken his own life. That shocked me to the core.”



Judge Sheila Abdus-Salaam

The issue of mental health on the bench was catapulted into the national discussion this week after the body of New York Court of Appeals Judge Sheila Abdus-Salaam [was found Wednesday](#) floating in the Hudson River. Abdus-Salaam, the first African-American woman on New York's highest court, had been reported missing by her husband a day earlier and police are investigating the death as a possible suicide, according to New York Law Journal, an ALM publication.

- Related coverage: [NY Legal Community in Shock Over Abdus-Salaam's Death](#)
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According to an [American Bar Association study](#) released last year, a significant percentage of lawyers suffer from mental health issues and addiction. But while bar associations across the country have devoted money and resources to [help attorneys battle mental health and addiction issues](#), not nearly as many resources have been focused on judges. And that may be because many jurists are extremely reluctant to discuss those problems, Willing said.

“Like any issue that is so personal with so much taboo surrounding it, it doesn’t get discussed,” Willing said. “That judge may have to stand for re-election. Some may have health insurance to cover it, and some may not. And a lot of family members circle the wagons in a way that might make it harder for the person to get help.”

Eileen Travis, director of the [New York City Bar Association’s Lawyer Assistance Program](#), also said that judges are wary of reporting that they are having mental health problems.

“They’re afraid that if word gets out, that’s just going to be it. That’s going to be the end of their career,” Travis said.

All states have laws protecting the confidentiality of lawyers and judges who seek assistance, Travis said. New York’s law, Judiciary Law §499, also grants immunity from civil liability to those who work for lawyer assistance programs.

For judges—who make up a small percentage of those who seek help from her office—there may be pressure to keep “cool, calm and collected,” Travis said, and a view that, as the ultimate problem-solvers in many cases, they need to maintain a veneer of being problem-free themselves.

“Even though, behind the scenes, they may be struggling with things that we all struggle with,” she said.

The American Bar Association has a [national hotline for judges](#) who are having mental health and addiction problems that is operated by the Texas Lawyers’ Assistance

Program (TLAP)—a State Bar of Texas program that offers confidential help with lawyers, law students and judges.

But Bree Buchanan, director of TLAP, said that judges rarely call.

“They are invited to make a confidential phone call and we’ll help to find them resources and another peer support judge in the community that has faced something similar,” Buchanan said. “And we get about five or six calls a year.”

Judges often feel alone in their jobs because they have to separate themselves from the legal community for ethical reasons when they take the bench, she said.

“The problems that judges face are similar to stressors that lawyers face but I think they are more acute. Their degree of isolation is greatly increased,” Buchanan said. “And they can’t show any weakness or vulnerability even more than a lawyer because they are charged with making life-or-death decisions in their community. These factors in particular, combined, make it almost impossible for judges to reach out for help.”

Buchanan notes that it is often hard for members of the public to pick up on warning signs when a judge suffers from severe depression. For example, an impaired judge’s work product often does not suffer until their mental illness begins to spiral out of control. Some judges may give away their mental health issues if they display a disheveled appearance in court or are often late or missing from their jobs, she said.

“And then the difficulty becomes, what can be done about it?” Buchanan said. “And who in the county is going to approach the judge? It becomes very difficult.”

Buchanan said she encourages any judge who may be suffering from depression, mental health issues or addiction problems to call the ABA hotline for help at 1-800-219-6474.

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