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Missoula Prosecutors Recognized For Fighting 'Secondary Trauma'

By [EDWARD O'BRIEN \(/PEOPLE/EDWARD-OBRIEN\)](/PEOPLE/EDWARD-OBRIEN) • JUL 17, 2017



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Left to Right: Clinical social worker Andy Laue; First Step social worker MC Jenni; Missoula County Attorney Kirsten Pabst; Missoula Deputy County Attorney Brittany Williams; Missoula Deputy County Attorney Jordan Kilby

EDWARD O'BRIEN



Listen

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People who work with crime and trauma victims talk about the challenges of preserving their own mental health.

Missoula's County Attorney says helping victims of violent crime is deeply rewarding work.

But Kirsten Pabst adds there's also a dark side to the job that's not talked about enough.

"Prosecutors have a really high incidence of turnover, burnout and a really high incidence of suicide," Pabst says. "What we're learning now, finally, is that doing this kind of work, which is good work and helping real people, isn't sustainable unless you take care of it and process the trauma that we're exposed to every day."

Pabst is talking about secondary trauma. It's a lot like Post Traumatic Stress Disorder. Her office is gaining national attention for its in-house secondary trauma program.

It's designed for prosecutors like Missoula Deputy County Attorney Jordan Kilby who don't want the intensity of the job to adversely affect their professional or personal lives.

"Really at the end of the day we're working with people who've been through a whole lot more," Kilby says. "The point of this program is just to be able to continue to do that work. Taking care of yourself is a big part of that."

Kilby says she and her colleagues signed up for hard work and aren't looking for pity, but they also recognize that something in their career has to give.

County Attorney Pabst says her team of prosecutors aren't only stressed by their caseload volume, they're also constantly exposed to the worst of human nature.

Pabst and her team spent a year preparing their recent case against Missoulian Emmanuel Gomez.

"Mr. Gomez was charged and convicted of essentially torturing his girlfriend over a number of months and ultimately killing her and then dumping her body in Pattee Canyon," Pabst says.

In May Gomez was sentenced to life in prison with no chance of parole for murdering Charlie Ann Wyrick. That was a big win for Pabst and her team, but that case and scores more like it, takes a heavy toll on everyone involved.

"We pored over those photographs. We had multiple meetings with the victim's family. By the time we present the case to the jury, we know it. It's part of us," she says. "It's sad and it's hard and it's macabre."

Andrew Laue is the Missoula clinical social worker hired by the county attorney's office to help design the secondary trauma program.

"Our best workers are the ones who are most susceptible to secondary trauma," Laue says. "They're utilizing themselves in such an open and responsive and effective way to support their client. In doing that they're receiving the client's experience deeply in the fiber of their own body, emotion and mind."

Meaning those who work extensively with crime victims can experience PTSD-like symptoms; depression, intrusive thoughts, fatigue and strained personal relationships to name just a few.

The county attorney's trauma program was adapted from one Laue created for Saint Patrick Hospital's First Step program in Missoula, which helps families affected by abuse.

First Step's MC Jenni is a licensed clinical social worker who loves her work, but who also is familiar with symptoms of secondary trauma.

"How it shows up in me is criticism coming out, defensiveness with my own family, with my partners, with friends" Jenni says, "competitiveness, I have to conquer something if I can't conquer something at work. That's when I start spiraling into that dark place."

Program participants learn about the biological impacts of trauma and how to recognize the associated risks and symptoms.

They're encouraged to share their experiences and feelings with colleagues and even set aside time to ignore work-related phone, email and text messages.

Pabst says this is groundbreaking stuff in the legal world. She knows of no other secondary trauma program in any other prosecutor's office in the country. And it's a far cry from the attitudes taught when she was law student.

"There wasn't a lot of talk about values or self-care," Pabst says. "It was more, 'Buck up, Buttercup. You can do this.'"

According to Pabst, seeking emotional support has long been deemed a weakness in the historically male-dominated and stoic prosecution and law enforcement professions, but times have changed and she thinks those attitudes should change with them.

Deputy Missoula County Attorney Brittany Williams says it's made a world of difference for her – and her employer.

“One of the core principles that we worked on in this program was our ‘window of tolerance,’” Willaims says, "which is basically where you’re able to work most effectively, have a positive outlook. By working on these different techniques to help you expand your window of tolerance, you’re able to work longer, get tasks done more efficiently and be a better employee.”

The National Association of Counties is now promoting the Missoula County Attorney office’s in-house trauma program around the country saying it’s worthy of replication.

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