

LOCAL NEWS

Boulder County to see behavioral health support for criminal justice advocates

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Gov. Jared Polis signed into law Senate Bill 188 on May 20, creating a prosecutorial and defense attorney behavioral health program.

This bill appropriates \$500,000 for the grant program. Recipients can use money for counseling services and peer support programs, as well as training and education programs that teach the symptoms of job-related trauma and how to prevent and treat it.

Boulder County District Attorney Michael Dougherty, who has been a prosecutor for 25 years, knows firsthand how staff can be affected by their work. District Attorneys' staff can be impacted by repeated exposure to the trauma of others, including the impacts that come from visiting crime scenes, attending autopsies, viewing videos and photos of violent crime and child pornography, and meeting with victims of horrific crimes, he said.

"I've seen the prosecution community become more aware of the impact this has on individuals," Dougherty said.

The office has managed to organize temporary programs beginning in 2018 to support staff wellbeing; however, this bill will provide funding to make these programs more permanent.

In 2020, the Boulder DA's office joined the inaugural cohort for the Colorado Well-Being Recognition Program for Legal Employers which is sponsored by the Colorado Supreme Court.

Past programs have included guest speakers and counseling.

The DA's office already has these systems in place, so they will begin applying for this permanent funding as soon as possible in order to make the services and support a permanent part of the office, Dougherty said.

Elaina Shively, who is a prosecutor at the Boulder DA's office and helps implement their well-being programs, added that this funding will be much more sustainable.

"We had to scrape together resources before," she said.

Shively took advantage of these resources herself during a case that deeply impacted her own well-being. "Having people who are working in the system be able to quickly, confidentially and without a financial burden access treatment was so important," she said.

The bill allocates \$250,000 to the Office of the Colorado State Public Defender and \$250,000 to the Colorado District Attorney's Council, which then distributes money to individual offices. An office can apply for funding by demonstrating it will use the money for an appropriate cause.

Dougherty added that all staff will benefit from this funding including legal assistants, investigators, attorneys and victim advocates.

This bill will protect staff from the long-term impacts of the job, he said. It is important for the community as a whole that criminal justice advocates stay healthy so that they are able to make the best possible decisions.

"I recognize the responsibility the community has entrusted to us," Dougherty said.

The bill makes funding available to public defenders, but not to defense lawyers in private practice. The Boulder County Public Defender's



Shively hopes that with this extra funding, well-being resources can work preventatively as well.

"Hopefully this will help decrease stigma and build the resilience needed for a job like this," she said.

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Anna Ridilla

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