Family Law Mental Health Professionals- Not for the Faint of Heart

Research Study

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Research Study Evolution

And so it began… a collaboration between legal and mental health professionals to gain a better understanding of the issues affecting family law.

Funded through AFCC Ontario



Phase One: Focus Groups

- Phase One- focus groups.
- We invited mental health professionals to participate in focus groups.
- We wanted representation from all over the province including rural, northern areas of Ontario



Focus Group Participants

- A total of 22 professionals participated across the focus groups. Professional Backgrounds
- Social Workers (Largest Group)
- Psychologists
- Psychotherapists and Family Law Specialists
- Represented areas of Ontario
- Highly experienced



Themes across all Focus Groups

1. Impact of Professional Complaints and it's process

2. Workforce Attrition

3. Increasing complexity of cases

4.Legal and MHP relationships, stressful at times.

5.Increased need for defensive practice

6.Need for mentorship, consultation, peer support.

7.Access to Justice concerns for clients



Phase Two- Survey

- Overview: The survey collected 47 responses from professionals working in the family-law system, exploring their practice characteristics, interactions with legal professionals, experiences with complaints and litigation, stress and well-being, and training needs.

Survey Respondent Profile

- The survey drew a diverse mix of professionals. Social Workers (RSW) were the largest group (16 respondents), followed by Psychologists (6). Eight respondents identified under "Other," including mediators/parenting coordinators, a Registered Couple and Family Therapist, and a retired social worker. One Social Service Worker (SSW) also responded.
- Most respondents (27) were currently registered with a professional regulatory college, while 4 were not. Among those registered, experience ranged widely — from 3 years to over 50 years, with many reporting 15–25+ years of practice.
- The most common practice setting was sole practice (17), followed by group or collective practice (10). Two worked in public or not-for-profit agencies, and two noted hybrid arrangements.

Combined themes of Data from Surveys

A substantial majority of respondents are heavily embedded in family-law work, those that left the work cited burnout, fear of complaints/ litigation.

Concerns with lawyer and MHP relations increasing over years.

Judicial concerns of lack of family law experience and orders working against clinical work

self represented litigants- more conflict, more work

Complaints, legal action and online criticism

Stress, burnout, lack of protection

Need for increased training (AFCC cited as best opportunity)

Phase three: Interviews

- Participants included psychologists, social workers, mediators, and parenting coordinators with experience ranging from early-career to over 30 years in practice. Interviews were conducted between March and May 2026.
- The following themes emerged with sufficient frequency and consistency across the interview dataset to be considered structural features of MHP experience in family law.

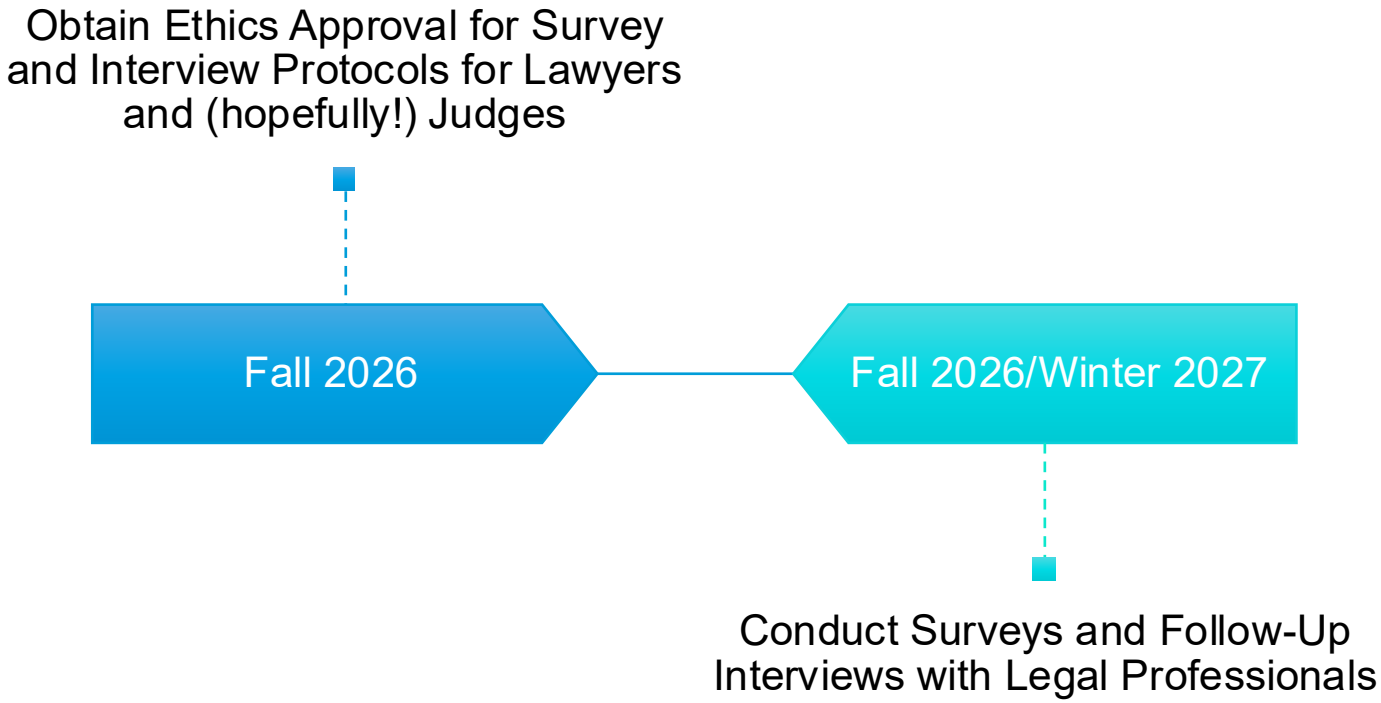
Summary of information from the Interviews

- The College Complaint process is traumatic
- Complaints used as a Litigation strategy
- Professional withdrawal and sustainability
- Institutions as protective buffers
- Tensions with legal profession
- Urban/rural cultural divide
- The need for interdisciplinary education
- Mental and Physical Health consequences
- Social media attacks
- Post covid culture change
- Regulatory gaps is College complaint framework
- Withdrawal of assessors due to concerns and impact on judicial system and families

Key Takeaways from the Data

- The data paints a picture of a dedicated but overburdened professional community.
- Practitioners are deeply involved in high-stakes family-law work, often interacting with lawyers in almost every file, and carrying a meaningful risk of formal complaints and online criticism.
- Majority of professionals have faced a regulatory complaint, and the process is widely perceived as unfair and poorly calibrated to the realities of adversarial family law.
- Stress is high, and many have adopted defensive practice strategies or reduced/exited this work.
- The strongest unmet needs centre on complaint reform, inter-professional respect, better peer support, and more specialized and contextually relevant training.

Next Phase: Data Collection from Legal Professionals



Ongoing Additional Study and Collaboration

Continued analysis of existing family law/regulatory regimes (across North America) to assess the range of measures adopted in response to comparable challenges

Continued (informal) collaboration with sub-group of AFCC New Jersey looking at similar issues

Thank you for your attention and interest in our research work which we hope benefits the field of Family Law and the families that depend on it.