

Opioids and the Courts

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National

[America's Other Epidemic](#)

The Atlantic

[Ripley County, Indiana] Circuit Court Judge Ryan King's docket was overwhelmed not just by drug crime but also by drug-related child neglect. "I've seen the placement with the foster parent, and then the foster turns out to be using drugs too," King (no relation to Nikki [King]) told me. "After hearings like that, you just want to quit. You think, *My goodness, what are we ever gonna do? What are we doing?*"

[Founder of Ripley County Courts Addiction and Drug Services (CADS) Program, Nikki King] and Judge King both attended a countywide opioid forum in 2018, a year after a local woman overdosed in a Chuck E. Cheese bathroom in Cincinnati, as her 5- and 7-year-old children played in the restaurant. Nikki had worked her way up from graduate fellow to manager of the hospital's mental health and addiction services, and she was trying to ensure that patients who overdosed and ended up in Margaret Mary's emergency department got referrals for follow-up care, including MAT. But [MAT drugs are nearly impossible to get in rural America](#), where more than half of [the] counties don't have a single buprenorphine provider, and methadone is even less available. Counseling services, too, are in extremely short supply—the ratio of residents to mental health providers in Ripley County is 2,200 to 1. More often than not, patients who overdosed and wound up in Margaret Mary's ER were treated with Narcan, the overdose antidote, and released. If hospital staff ever saw them again, it was usually for another overdose, sometimes a fatal one.

Elsewhere in the U.S., drug courts—which allow addicted offenders to enter a treatment program instead of going to jail—have been shown to reduce recidivism. But drug courts are expensive to operate and tend to be concentrated in cities and suburbs. Many leave treatment decisions to local judges, prosecutors, and probation supervisors—[who may or may not understand addiction medicine](#). About half of [the] drug courts prohibit the use of MAT; [and] some funnel probationers into abstinence-only 12-step programs, despite overwhelming evidence that they're less effective for opioid addiction.

Ripley County has never had the resources for a drug court anyway. Two years ago, the county's probation program for drug offenders required drug testing but offered only two hours of group therapy a week and no MAT. At the opioid forum, when Nikki heard Judge King describe that as the county's "drug treatment," she challenged him. "I think we can do a lot better," she said. The program she eventually created, with the county judges' blessing, provides *nine* hours of group therapy and a variety of social supports, plus MAT. Three nights a week, probationers in the new Courts Addiction & Drug Services, or CADS, program receive cognitive behavioral therapy, job coaching, meditation training, and other services.