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INDIANA  
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# Indiana's problem-solving courts look for alternative ways to fund efforts

December 17, 2025 | **Maura Johnson**

KEYWORDS **FUNDING / PROBLEM-SOLVING COURTS**

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*The problem-solving courts at the Boone County Courthouse in Lebanon are being supported by a new nonprofit created this year. (Maura Johnson/The Indiana Lawyer).*

As part of his sentencing for a driving while intoxicated offense two years ago, Dustin Kleysteuber was assigned to participate in Knox County's Drug Court.

The court is an official problem-solving court under the Indiana Supreme Court's Office of Court Services, combining treatment, supervision, and support to offenders who could otherwise be incarcerated for their offenses.

Since the late 1990s, a growing number of counties across the state have adopted this alternative way to address repeat offenders. These problem-solving courts are specifically designed to aid offenders whose problems, in one way or another, cannot be supported in the traditional court setting, according to the Office of Court Services.

Judges and other court officials have a more hands-on approach in these alternative spaces, backing participants with the goal to reduce recidivism and encourage safer communities in non-traditional ways.

"They provide incentives for our participants as they go through the program to reward their efforts at behavior change, but they also provide funding to support community activities for our participants to promote social positive engagement," said Joseph Williams, coordinator of the Knox County Drug Court.

For participants like Kleysteuber, problem-solving courts have changed the trajectory of their lives, offering a chance to move forward from the past choices they've made.

"I was going through a pretty rough time, and the drug court actually helped me find a place to live, and they helped me with the deposit and the first month's rent to get a place



*Joseph Williams*

for me and my children to live," Kleysteuber said. "They've helped me establish, like, a stronghold within my sobriety."

Kleysteuber is one of several stories that attest to the success of the state's problem-solving courts.

Earlier this year, Indiana Supreme Court Chief Justice Loretta Rush celebrated the noted successes of problem-solving courts, citing a 2023 independent study by Temple University that found that 93% of problem-solving court graduates were not rearrested.

As these courts grow, court administrators are seeing a greater monetary need to support participants' immediate and evolving roadblocks. In response, the courts are getting creative, seeking the help of nonprofits and non-governmental funding to meet offenders right where they are.

## Growing trend

Problem-solving courts are relatively new to much of Indiana. The first two problem-solving courts were established in 1996 in Vigo County and the city of Gary.

Now, Indiana has nearly 160 problem-solving courts operating in 61 of its 92 counties. While many counties operate just one problem-solving court, some, like Allen and Lake counties, have numerous ones, including courts that support veterans, drug addiction recovery, and mental health treatment.

Boone County has two problem-solving courts that serve participants in drug use recovery and family matters.

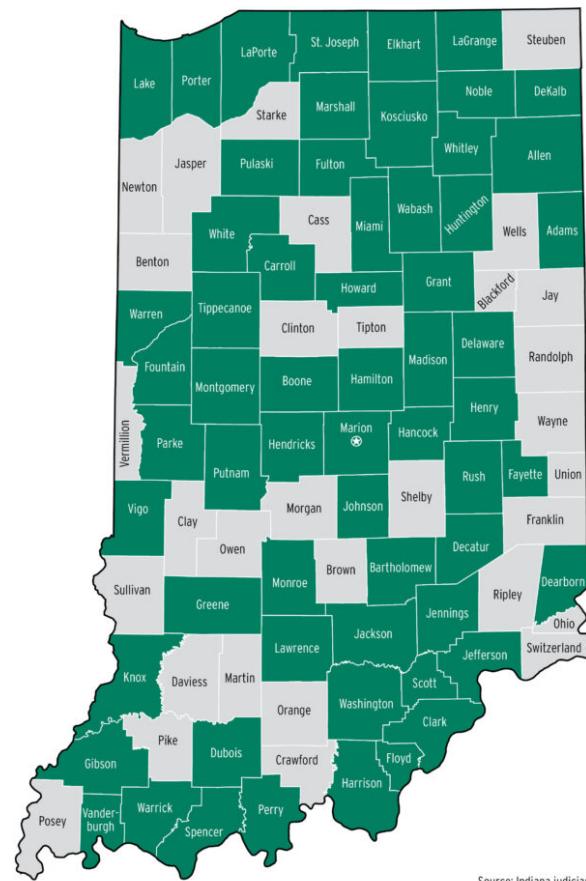
“For people in early recovery, for people with that history, it’s so much easier to just accept failure and fall back into the prior behavior patterns that you know are destructive, that you know are harmful,” Williams said. “But at least [the support] provides that disconnect from the pain of trying and failing.”

Problem-solving courts operate under the Indiana Supreme Court's Office of Court Services, which certifies that each court complies with the organization's set of operating rules. These rules include who can be appointed to serve in a problem-solving court and how potential participants are assessed in order to be accepted into a program.

A high number of Indiana's problem-solving courts focus their efforts on recovery from alcohol and drug use. But as needs evolve across the state, so too do ways of fulfilling

## Problem-solving courts

*Sixty-one of Indiana's 92 counties have at least one problem-solving court.*



them. In March 2024, for example, the state passed a law establishing a safe baby court as a new kind of problem-solving court.

Problem-solving courts certified under the office of court services are eligible for state, federal, and private funding. For state-specific funding, the courts can apply for grants to cover the costs of items like staff salaries and benefits, staff training, drug tests, and some incentives.

Since establishing their respective problem-solving courts, court administrators have acknowledged that a reduction in state funding and a notable need for participant incentives has caused them to adjust where they get money from. Many of them have established nonprofits to support their efforts to help participants on their road to recovery.

## Adjusting to funding changes

Last month, Boone County announced the establishment of the Boone County Problem Solving Court Foundation, which acts as an additional source of funding for the county's problem-solving courts.

In October, the foundation was a recipient of a 2025 unrestricted grant from the Community Foundation of Boone County. Unlike money from government sources, which rely on taxpayer dollars and therefore have parameters for spending, unrestricted grants can help pay for needs like emergency car repairs for program participants.

The Boone County Problem Solving Court Foundation will supplement funding for similar needs, presenting more opportunities for court administrators to be a bit more flexible with their spending.

"We've been trying to help pay some past due traffic tickets so people can get their licenses back," said Jana Schwindt, a drug court administrator for Boone County Community Corrections. "One of my clients was going to get his cell phone shut off, so we paid that so he would have his phone for the month."



Jana Schwindt

Problem-solving court administrators stress that nonprofit spending goes toward court participants who are actively working on full recovery and financial security, which is required in the program.

Program participants must prove these efforts to receive assistance on things like housing deposits, car repairs, and even gas money.

"People in drug court are held to a higher standard than those on regular probation," said Sara Higgs, a program administrator for the Knox County Alcohol and Drug Program. "That's why it's drug court."

When establishing its own nonprofit, Boone County modeled its efforts after the program in Knox County.

The Knox County Drug Court Foundation was established around 2017, shortly after the county's drug court was founded by Williams and former



Sara Higgs

## Judge Ryan Johanningsmeier.

Efforts to develop the nonprofit were spearheaded by Judge Johanningsmeier, who saw the value of the model in other states and realized the need for it in his own county.

Court administrators say funding for the nonprofit allows them to act on the immediate needs of drug court participants. These needs, according to Williams, can often make or break a participants' ability to continue their path toward recovery.

"Something as little as a \$50 outstanding utility bill can be the barrier, can be the stumbling block that just knocks them off track and keeps them from progressing forward," he said. "And our foundation steps in to help participants to achieve independence, get housing, get transportation, get access to medications and treatment services."

When the nonprofit was founded, the foundation's board tested several approaches to raising money for their work, including a benefit dinner.

They soon realized, however, that a formal event didn't fit the personality of the organization and in 2020, hosted the first annual "All Rise for Ryan's Run for Recovery". The 5K run/walk event honors the memory of Judge Johanningsmeier and his work to help Knox County residents in recovery.

The event is held on Labor Day weekend each year to raise money for the foundation.

"Between that and grant writing through local partners, the local Kiwanis, our chamber of commerce, and then our monetary donations...that's kept us afloat," Higgs said. "We've never been in it to make a profit."

## Lasting impact

Williams cites numerous scenarios where county officials were able to swoop in and help a problem-solving court participant using money from Knox County's nonprofit. He recalled one instance where a woman who was eligible for drug court was being released from jail on a Friday evening but had nowhere to stay the night.

Rather than letting the woman fall back into old patterns and find shelter somewhere where her addiction recovery could be compromised, Williams called on the drug court foundation to help find her a place to stay for a few nights.

"We were able to get her in a safe hotel room, get food for her, make sure that she was taken care of and had all the stuff that she needed to get through the weekend safely," he said. "Monday morning, we hit the ground and activated all the other community resources and supports to keep that path going."

Court administrators in Knox and Boone counties are aware that some people may be skeptical to support participants recovering from addiction and other challenges through the problem-solving courts.

Washington Superior Court Judge Dustin Houchin recently wrote in a column for The Lawyer that he believes the criminal justice system and the rehabilitation system should remain separate.

He argues that money spent on problem-solving courts would be better spent funding treatment centers where mental health and substance abuse patients could interact with doctors, psychiatrists, psychologists, therapists and social workers, instead of judges, prosecutors, defense lawyers and corrections officers.

But supporters of problem-solving courts say the programs have been critical in helping participants stay sober.

“Not everybody wants to invest in what they consider an addict, but if you invest in people in recovery and they work for it, they will return your investment tenfold,” Schwindt said. “They are some of the hardest working, bravest people I’ve ever seen.”•