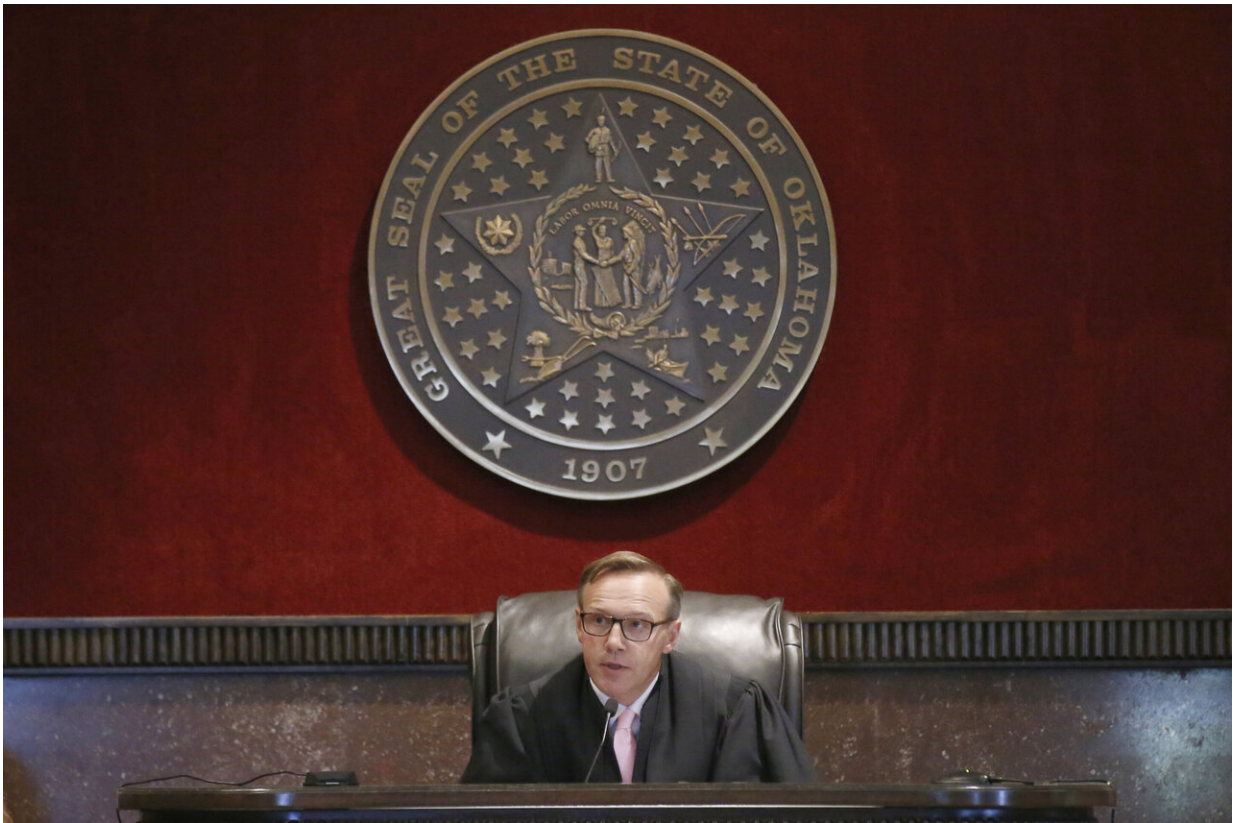


# As opioid settlements grow, so do questions about the money

August 28 2019, by Sean Murphy

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Judge Thad Balkman announces his decision in the Opioid Lawsuit In Norman, Okla., Monday, Aug. 26, 2019. Balkman found Johnson & Johnson and its subsidiaries helped fuel the state's opioid drug crisis and ordered the consumer products giant to pay \$572 million to help abate the problem in the coming years. (AP Photo/Sue Ogrocki, Pool)

Oklahoma's legal fight against the opioid industry has racked up settlements and judgments of nearly \$1 billion, but as the numbers keep rising, so do concerns over how that money will be spent.

Experts say the \$572 million judgment issued Monday against consumer products giant Johnson & Johnson could pay for a year's worth of statewide drug-treatment efforts. But the company has already announced plans to appeal, which could tie up the money for years. Meanwhile, addiction counselors worry about when their clients might get more help.

"We get applications every day from people who want help but don't have the funds to come into our program," said Lance Lang, who is recovering from an [opioid addiction](#) and now helps operate an Oklahoma City nonprofit that provides housing for others suffering from addiction.

Cleveland County District Judge Thad Balkman ordered the payment after ruling that Johnson & Johnson and its subsidiaries helped fuel the state's [opioid](#) crisis. The judgment was more than twice the amount Oxycontin-maker Purdue Pharma agreed to pay in a separate settlement.

The allegations against Johnson & Johnson were the first state opioid case to make it to trial, and the outcome could help shape negotiations involving roughly 1,500 similar lawsuits filed by state, local and tribal governments. Those governments are seeking to recover costs ranging from packed jails to overworked coroners and public defenders. Their cases have been consolidated before a federal judge in Ohio.



Judge Thad Balkman reads a summary of his decision in the opioid trial at the Cleveland County Courthouse in Norman, Okla., Monday, Aug. 26, 2019. Balkman ruled in favor of the state of Oklahoma and ordered Johnson and Johnson to pay \$572 million to a plan to abate the opioid crisis. (Chris Landsberger/The Oklahoman via AP, Pool)

Lang, who said he became hooked on painkillers after getting his wisdom teeth pulled, said entry into a sober-living home costs about \$750 up front and \$600 per month.

"That's pretty affordable, but I'd say between 50% and 60% don't have the funds to get in," Lang said.

Oklahoma's first settlement—a \$270 million deal with Purdue

Pharma—was almost entirely earmarked for an addiction research center at Oklahoma State University. It faced fierce criticism from the families and survivors of the nation's opioid crisis, who said they wanted a trial to reveal more details about Purdue's responsibility for the epidemic.

None of the money from Purdue will be spent until a trust has been set up to oversee the funds. A separate \$85 million settlement was reached later with Israeli-owned Teva Pharmaceutical Industries Ltd.



Oklahoma Attorney General Mike Hunter, center, answers a question during a news conference following the announcement of the Opioid Lawsuit decision in Norman, Okla., Monday, Aug. 26, 2019. Pictured from left are attorneys Reggie Whitten, Michael Burrage, Hunter, attorney Brad Beckworth and Terri White, Commissioner, Oklahoma Department of Mental Health and Substance Abuse Services. (AP Photo/Sue Ogrocki)

"I fear that if the state's decision on how to spend the Purdue settlement money is any guide, they're going to fumble the ball and more people are going to die as a result of it," said Ryan Hampton, who also battled an opioid addiction and wrote a book on the crisis titled "American Fix—Inside the Opioid Addiction Crisis and How to End It."

"I'm all for research, but spending such a large proportion of money on research at this point when we have people who are literally dying on street corners in Oklahoma because they can't access services? That is a crime in itself."

Hampton emphasized treatment options that support not just recovery from opioid addiction, but also other drugs and alcohol.

"The bottom line is that if we're not setting up an infrastructure that's all inclusive for behavioral health and [addiction](#) services, then we're setting ourselves up for failure," he said.



Oklahoma Attorney General Mike Hunter, from left, and the State's attorneys Michael Burrage, Brad Beckworth and Reggie Whitten listen as Judge Thad Balkman reads a summary of his decision in the opioid trial at the Cleveland County Courthouse in Norman, Okla., Monday, Aug. 26, 2019. Judge Balkman ruled in favor of the State of Oklahoma, that Johnson and Johnson pay \$572 million to a plan to abate the opioid crisis. (Chris Landsberger/The Oklahoman via AP, Pool)



Sabrina Strong, an attorney for Johnson & Johnson and its subsidiaries, answers a question during a news conference following the announcement of the decision in the Opioid Lawsuit in Norman, Okla., Monday, Aug. 26, 2019. (AP Photo/Sue Ogrocki)



Judge Thad Balkman reads a summary of his decision to a full courtroom during the opioid trial at the Cleveland County Courthouse in Norman, Okla., Monday, Aug. 26, 2019. Balkman ruled in favor of the state of Oklahoma and ordered Johnson and Johnson to pay \$572 million to a plan to abate the opioid crisis. (Chris Landsberger/The Oklahoman via AP, Pool)

Terri White, commissioner of the Oklahoma Department of Mental Health and Substance Abuse Services since 2007, defended both the state's settlement with Purdue and the plan for using the judgment from Johnson & Johnson.

The plan "is evidence-based. It's the gold standard," White said. "The primary components are prevention and medication-assisted treatment, which is the cutting-edge."

White acknowledged the state's 30-year plan called for more than \$17 billion and that the money from Johnson & Johnson alone isn't enough to



stop the crisis.

"I think this is going to be a giant first-year step, but I do think it will take more than one year," she said.

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