

# New teen mental health court: 'We see the need in the community'

September 26 2023, by Amy Lavalley, Chicago Tribune

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Porter County, Indiana, has expanded its problem-solving courts to include a mental health court for teens, the first of its kind in the state.

"You just see an explosion in anxiety and depression right now, and especially the social phobias," said Alison Cox, the county's director of juvenile detention services and the [court](#)'s administrator, adding much of that stems from isolation during the COVID-19 pandemic, and "that's across the board in all problem solving courts."

According to the 2023 Indiana Kids Count Databook, 46.9% of [high school students](#) in the state reported feeling sad or hopeless for more than two weeks in 2021; that figure was 29.3% in 2015.

"Mental health has become a focus throughout most areas of daily life," the databook notes. "This heightened focus was caused, in part, by the exacerbation of [mental health](#) issues due to the COVID-19 pandemic. During much of the pandemic, individuals reported feeling stress, anxiety, fear, and isolation."

"The bottom line is, we see the need in the community," Porter Circuit Court Judge Mary DeBoer said.

She saw success in the mental health court under Porter Superior Court Judge Christopher Buckley, and wanted to bring the same potential benefits to teens.

"Maybe if we catch this now, they won't end up in my court," she said. "This was something all of us felt so strongly about."

Cox is seeing an uptick in the Juvenile Detention Center as well, and in referrals being evaluated by probation officers.

Because the various players in problem solving courts "can't work in silos," Cox said, they are working together in what she called a "one house approach," so teens in probation or detention get an assessment to determine if they would benefit from diversion.

One of the goals of the program, she said, is to keep kids out of [juvenile detention](#) through diversion in the problem solving courts, day reporting or [house arrest](#), which has different levels of coordinated supervision.

The approach is a good one, Cox added, because being housed in detention can make problems worse.

"The problem solving courts aren't the only thing on the continuum," Cox said, adding officials try to keep kids in the community when they can.

The problem solving courts hold team meetings and court late on Wednesday afternoons and officials decided they could tackle the new court then as well.

"It's very informal," DeBoer said, adding she doesn't wear the robe she has for court. Cox added it's "a roundtable approach," with participants sitting around a table while a court reporter takes notes.

"It's a neat way for them to see the nonthreatening side of things," DeBoer said. "This is my opportunity to connect with these kids and show them the judge isn't all hard and bad."

The message to kids, she added, is that the program is a way to work through their problems that's less threatening to them than a court setting.

The program received a provisional certificate from the state to operate in February, when it enrolled two teens for a [pilot program](#), DeBoer said.

One, DeBoer said, is doing very well while the second had more issues than the court could handle and was placed in a treatment program. DeBoer is hopeful that the teen can return to the court after treatment

and continue in the program.

In August, representatives from the state's Office of Court Services, part of the Indiana Supreme Court, came to observe the program, which is now fully certified and no longer provisional.

"Because we have other problem-solving courts, they know we know what we're doing," DeBoer said.

The teen mental health court was created on the heels of two other juvenile problem solving courts within the county, truancy court, certified in 2022 and also the first of its kind in the state, and the juvenile and family drug court, certified in 2008.

The problem-solving courts, Cox said, all have to follow court rules established by state statute. The programs allow the courts to focus on the specialized needs of their clients.

For the new program, Cox said officials worked with the prosecutor's office, court security, the public defender's office, probation and other departments, with the goal of providing the program "with minimal cost to the county."

The mental health court focuses on youth with significant [mental health issues](#) who have been referred to the juvenile justice system, but for whom traditional means of probation supervision have not been successful, DeBoer said. The court seeks to limit youth with [mental illness](#) from continued involvement in the juvenile justice system by providing them with treatment, community resources and accountability.

For the most part, Cox said, teens would remain in teen mental health court for 9 to 12 months, going through the program in phases.

"This is new. We don't know," DeBoer said, adding that isn't the case for teens who officials have dealt with before.

Teens charged with high-level felonies, including drug trafficking, [sexual assault](#) and other violent crimes, "those are the ones we're going to take a pause," Cox said.

She clarified that she isn't saying they would be rejected from the program, since a teen with mental health issues might do something horrific and could benefit from the court.

"We never want to say never because these courts are so individualized for the participants," she said.

There is room for 10 [teens](#) in each of the problem solving courts, though there are three kids in the truancy court, four in the drug court, and officials are processing three referrals. Those include one for mental health and two for drug court.

The problem solving courts are for kids ages 13 to 17.

Referrals for the mental health court come from juvenile probation and Porter-Starke Services, DeBoer said.

"Are they committing these crimes because of drugs?" she said. "And sometimes we find these kids have way more mental health issues and mental health court might be a better placement."

All of the teen problem solving courts have the same team of people, "but the focus is very different for each case," DeBoer said, adding if a teen who has mental health issues is attending drug court, "we're not going to say, that's for another day."

A handful of counties in Texas, Ohio and Florida have similar mental [health](#) court programs, Cox said, adding she and DeBoer researched other programs and also worked with the state Office of Court Services for guidance.

Discussion about the court started at the tail end of the COVID-19 pandemic, with meetings on Zoom to see if it was something officials wanted to do, and figure out how it could be meshed with the other teen problem solving courts serving the county.

"Everybody is here for the same goal. We want what's best for these kids and their families," DeBoer said.

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Citation: New teen mental health court: 'We see the need in the community' (2023, September 26) retrieved 6 May 2024 from <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2023-09-teen-mental-health-court-community.html>

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