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Is Involuntary Commitment a Good Opioid-Abuse Remedy?

By **Crime and Justice News** | August 24, 2017

Addiction advocates and terrified parents are pushing for more use of involuntary commitment laws as a tool to combat the opioid epidemic. It's a controversial tactic, with logistical and constitutional implications, [USA Today reports](https://www.usatoday.com/story/news/politics/2017/08/23/families-seek-involuntary-commitment-laws-key-tool-saving-opioid-addicts/594423001/) (<https://www.usatoday.com/story/news/politics/2017/08/23/families-seek-involuntary-commitment-laws-key-tool-saving-opioid-addicts/594423001/>). "What are we locking people into, for how long, and what happens afterwards?" asked Dr. Sarah Wakeman, medical director for substance use disorders at Massachusetts General Hospital, who said studies suggest coerced treatment is not effective. "If we are going to be removing someone's autonomy ... it's concerning if we're doing that in a way that's not even effective over the long term." Proponents argue it's a vital, last-resort option at a time when the opioid crisis is killing more than 90 Americans every day.

"This whole discussion of civil commitment is about to explode because of this epidemic that we're trying to survive," said Charlotte Wethington, who initiated a 2004 Kentucky law that allows parents to seek court-ordered addiction treatment for their adult children. Wethington's son, Casey, died from an overdose. More than 30 states have involuntary commitment laws, says the Hazelden Betty Ford Institute for Recovery Advocacy. While those statutes are used to confine people with serious mental illnesses, they are rarely used to hold those with substance abuse disorders, for a variety of reasons. In some states, such as Ohio, it's so difficult to get a petition approved that many families don't try. In other states, "judges and attorneys are hesitant to move forward" in part because of civil rights concerns, said Dr. Marvin Seppala of the Hazelden Betty Ford Foundation.
