

# Mental Health Matters

The newsletter of the Illinois State Bar Association's Section on Mental Health Law

## Administrative Office of the Illinois Courts Received Nearly \$3 Million Mental Health Grant Award

**THE ADMINISTRATIVE OFFICE OF** the Illinois Courts (AOIC) is pleased to announce approval of a competitive grant award from the Department of Health and Human Services, Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, Center for Mental Health Services. The grant project titled "Assisted Outpatient Treatment: A Pathway to Community Care" allocates up to \$2,915,393 over four years.

The AOIC and several justice partners will use the funds to operationalize a replicable and effective structure to

increase the utilization of statutorily-created civil outpatient pathways to mental health care, also referred to as Assisted Outpatient Treatment, in Cook and McLean Counties. This form of civil commitment authorizes the judicial system to commit eligible individuals with severe psychiatric disorders to mental health intervention in the community to improve the health, safety, and welfare of both individuals and the public.

"The AOIC is proud of this

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## While You Were Out: An Intimate Family Portrait of Mental Illness in an Era of Silence—A Conversation with the Author

BY SUSAN GOLDBERG

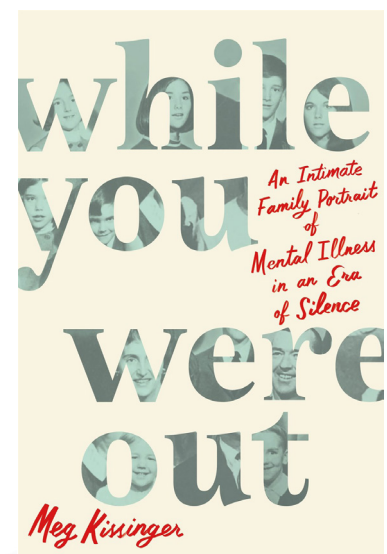
**I SAW MEG KISSINGER ONCE, ON** graduation day at DePauw University in Indiana, where she and my sister Jane were classmates. (Jane Pauley was the commencement speaker that day.) I had not thought about Meg for some time, until my sister last year told me about a book Meg had written about the mental health struggles within her family. The book has received wide acclaim, including The New York Times Book Review Editors' Choice and the Amazon Editors' Top 20 Best Memoirs of 2023.

As I read the book I was struck by the honest and painful recounting of the

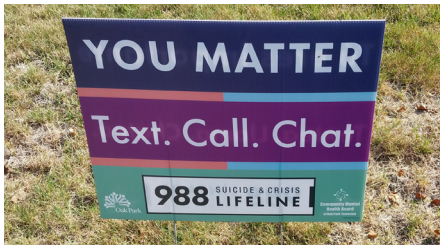
many losses in Meg's family. Her mother would often disappear, and only years later did Meg learn that her mother had been hospitalized for mental illness. Her father also had emotional issues, and two of her siblings—a brother and a sister—died by suicide. Especially during Meg's childhood, these conditions were shrouded in secrecy.

Meg was a reporter for daily newspapers for 35 years. She taught courses in investigative reporting and the failures of the mental health system and how to report them at the Columbia University School of Journalism from

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# 988 Suicide & Crisis Lifeline



**THE 988 SUICIDE & CRISIS LIFELINE** provides free and confidential emotional support to people in suicidal crisis or emotional distress 24 hours a day, seven days a week, across the United States and its territories. The 988 Lifeline is comprised of a national network of over 200 local crisis centers, combining local care and resources with national standards and best practices. ■

## Administrative Office of the Illinois Courts

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achievement and honored to receive its first ever SAMHSA funding award,” said Marcia M. Meis, AOIC Director. “I would like to thank the Illinois Supreme Court Special Advisory Committee for Justice and Mental Health Planning, State Court Behavioral Health Administrator, Grants Manager, Administrative Services Division, and several justice partners for their leadership in developing a competitive application and project model. The grant project is well aligned with the Illinois Courts’ Mental Health

Action Plan and will help further efforts to improve the courts’ response to individuals living with serious mental illness.”

The Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA) is the agency within the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services that leads public health efforts to advance the behavioral health of the nation. ■

*Article provided courtesy of the Illinois Courts.*

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## Mental Health Matters

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### OFFICE

ILLINOIS BAR CENTER  
424 S. SECOND STREET  
SPRINGFIELD, IL 62701  
PHONES: 217-525-1760 OR 800-252-8908  
[WWW.ISBA.ORG](http://WWW.ISBA.ORG)

### EDITOR

Sandra M. Blake

### COMMUNICATIONS MANAGER

Celeste Niemann

✉ [cniemann@isba.org](mailto:cniemann@isba.org)

### ART DIRECTOR

Ticara Turley

✉ [tturley@isba.org](mailto:tturley@isba.org)

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## While You Were Out

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2016 to 2022. She is now a trainer there on addressing trauma in journalism. Meg says, “The beauty of the J School is that all the instructors are hard-bitten journalists. I think they viewed me as this folksy Midwestern old lady.”

Meg had the idea to write this book since the time that her brother Danny died by suicide in 1997. Her sister Nancy had died by suicide in 1978. Meg says that she was “haunted” by those deaths and why the family could not prevent them. She found it easier to ask questions of complete strangers whose loved ones had died by suicide rather than ask her own family members. Initially, Meg was too scared to write the book for fear of being re-traumatized.

Meg’s book club, which she had been a part of for over 30 years, and her children, kept urging her to write the book. (“Mom, you keep saying that you’re going to write a book. You gotta write this book!”) Meg took a course on memoir writing at Columbia University where a writing coach taught her how to write a book proposal.

Meg has had about 50 speaking engagements where she has talked about her book, the mental illness in her family, and her work reporting on the “broken” mental health system. She has received many positive responses to her book.

“It’s so gratifying that my book appeals to people with family members who have mental illness,” she said.

The two main questions I hoped to address in my reporting were 1) Why is mental health care so inadequate? and 2) What can we do to make it better?

“My book aimed to say: Let’s talk about it. There is nothing to be ashamed of. No one wants to have depression or chaotic thoughts. Mental illness is not a moral failing or a willful act. And the family members of persons with mental illness are often cast as villains for trying to get them help.”

Meg’s view about mental health courts is that the spirit of them is great, but resources and resolve are needed for them to work.

Meg found the hardest part of writing the book was her anxiety about hurting

her siblings’ feelings, and her worry about telling their story accurately. All of the siblings signed on to the book “because of the amazing people that they are. I wondered if we couldn’t have done more. I had to stare down these feelings that I hadn’t dealt with. I think I emerged from this stronger, and I came away with a much greater appreciation for my parents and my siblings.”

When asked how to respond when a loved one needs mental health care but refuses it, Meg said, “Protect yourself. It can be quite ugly, and sometimes you need to distance yourself from it. Remember that it is an illness. I think that it all came home to me when I read a letter that my brother Danny wrote, not long before he died. He said ‘It’s terrible to have mental illness. What we need is love and understanding.’”

When asked what words she would

offer to members of the ISBA Mental Health Law Section, Meg said, “Gratitude! Helping people with mental illness is not an easy task and is thankless. So much of the need for mental health services is initiated in the criminal justice system. The back seat of a police car, in handcuffs, is not the optimal way to start this journey. There is a great need for people to access care for mental illness. Often the only way to do so is with the help of an attorney.” ■

*Susan Goldberg is a member of the ISBA Mental Health Law Section Council. She has been a volunteer GAL with Boone County CASA for 19 years. She is an attorney with Five Lakes Law Group and is a writer on labor and employment law topics for LexisNexis.*

*While You Were Out: An Intimate Family Portrait of Mental Illness in an Era of Silence can be purchased on Amazon.*

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