

INDIANA SUPREME COURT

In re Mental Health Actions for A.S., Sara Townsend

9 N.E.3d 129 (Ind. 2014) · No. 10S01-1402-MH-113 · Decided May 13, 2014

SUMMARY

The Indiana Supreme Court held that a trial court lacked statutory authority to hold Sara Townsend in indirect contempt for allegedly making false statements in an application that initiated emergency mental-health detention proceedings. The court also held that Townsend was outside the trial court’s inherent sanctioning power because she did not engage in misconduct within an ongoing judicial process, and it reversed the contempt finding and sanctions.

CASE DETAILS

COURT	Indiana Supreme Court
WRITING FOR THE COURT	David, Justice; Dickson, Chief Justice; Rucker, Justice; Massa, Justice; Rush, Justice
JURISDICTION	Indiana
DECIDED	May 13, 2014
DOCKET	10S01-1402-MH-113
DISPOSITION	reversed
PROCEDURAL POSTURE	Townsend appealed the Clark Circuit Court's judgment finding her in indirect civil contempt and imposing monetary and nonmonetary sanctions. The Indiana Court of Appeals held that the trial court lacked statutory authority to find her in contempt but upheld several sanctions under the court's inherent powers. The Indiana Supreme Court granted transfer, vacated the Court of Appeals opinion, and reversed the trial court's judgment.
PRECEDENTIAL VALUE	published precedential opinion
PARTIES	Sara Townsend v. A.S.

TOPICS

- health law
- contempt
- remedies
- statutory interpretation
- appellate procedure

PRACTICE AREAS

QUESTIONS PRESENTED

1. Whether the trial court had statutory authority under Indiana Code section 34-47-3-2 to find Townsend in indirect contempt for allegedly making false statements that initiated, rather than resisted, hindered, or delayed, a court process.
2. Whether the trial court could impose the same sanctions under its inherent judicial power even though Townsend was not a party or participant in an ongoing judicial proceeding and had not disobeyed a court order.

HOLDINGS

1. The trial court lacked statutory authority to find Townsend in indirect contempt because section 34-47-3-2 reaches willful resistance, hindrance, or delay in the execution of an existing lawful process or court order, while Townsend's conduct preceded and initiated the detention process.
2. The trial court could not impose sanctions under its inherent judicial power because Townsend's role ended when she submitted the emergency-detention application, and she did not engage in misconduct within an ongoing judicial process or after being subjected to the court's authority.

KEY QUOTATIONS

"It is axiomatic that she could not resist, hinder, or delay the execution of something that did not yet exist."
(at 4)

"The inherent power of the judiciary to impose sanctions, while flexible and significant, begins and ends with the courtroom and the judicial process." (at 6)

FACTUAL BACKGROUND

Sara Townsend, a nurse and co-worker of A.S., completed an application for A.S.'s seventy-two-hour emergency detention, alleging that A.S. was mentally ill and dangerous or gravely disabled and had threatened suicide. A physician endorsed the application, and the Clark Circuit Court issued a warrant for A.S.'s detention; A.S. was later released after hospital doctors found no basis for continued detention. The trial court concluded that Townsend's statements were false and reckless, found her in indirect civil contempt, and ordered her to pay A.S.'s hospital bill and attorney fees, pay a \$500 fine to the hospital, and write apology letters.

PROCEDURAL HISTORY

Townsend completed an application seeking A.S.'s emergency detention under Indiana Code section 12-26-5-1. After A.S. was released, the trial court ordered Townsend to show cause, found her in indirect civil contempt under Indiana Code section 34-47-3-2, and imposed hospital-bill, attorney-fee, fine, and apology-letter sanctions. The Court of Appeals reversed the contempt determination but upheld the sanctions as an exercise of inherent judicial power. The Indiana Supreme Court granted transfer and reversed the trial court in full.

DISPOSITION

reversed

CASES CITED

- City of Gary v. Major, 822 N.E.2d 165, 169 (Ind. 2005)
- State v. Heltzel, 552 N.E.2d 31, 33-34 (Ind. 1990)
- LaGrange v. State, 238 Ind. 689, 692-93, 153 N.E.2d 593, 595 (1958)
- Jones v. State, 847 N.E.2d 190, 199 (Ind. Ct. App. 2006), trans. denied
- Duemling v. Fort Wayne Community Concerts, Inc., 243 Ind. 521, 524, 188 N.E.2d 274, 276 (1963)
- Noble County v. Rogers, 745 N.E.2d 194, 197-98 (Ind. 2001)
- State ex rel. Brubaker v. Pritchard, 236 Ind. 222, 226-27, 138 N.E.2d 233, 235 (1956)
- Allied Property & Casualty Insurance Co. v. Good, 919 N.E.2d 144, 153, 155 (Ind. Ct. App. 2009), trans. denied
- Nationstar Mortgage, LLC v. Curatolo, 990 N.E.2d 491, 495 (Ind. Ct. App. 2013)
- In re Mental Health Actions for A.S., 997 N.E.2d 30, 35-37 (Ind. Ct. App. 2013)
- In re Mental Health Actions for A.S., Sara Townsend, 3 N.E.3d 975 (Ind. 2014) (table)