



ASHE COUNTY SHERIFF'S OFFICE

Sheriff B. Phil Howell

For Immediate Release
February 23rd, 2026

IMAT Program – Inmate Medication Assistance Treatment Program

Ashe County, NC – Sheriff B. Phil Howell is proud to announce the launch of a comprehensive Inmate Medication-Assisted Treatment (IMAT) Program at the Ashe County Detention Center. Research for this initiative began in 2023, with the program framework established in late 2024. Following the hiring of Detention Center Liaison Michael Carter, the IMAT program officially launched in July 2025. Treatment services began in October 2025, and the first inmate entered the program in November.

This program provides eligible inmates the opportunity to pursue recovery and reflects our continued commitment to strengthening public safety and supporting long-term rehabilitation in Ashe County. Opioid grant funding was thoroughly researched and secured several years ago, enabling this project to be fully funded without burdening local taxpayers.



The IMAT program aims to treat opioid and alcohol use disorder among the incarcerated population. The program focuses on treatment, recovery support, and long-term stability by combining evidence-based medication with counseling, peer support, and coordinated reentry services. Opioid use disorder is a chronic medical condition. According to the North Carolina Department of Health and Human Services, approximately 231,000 people in NC are living with an opioid use disorder. As of August 2025, eight people had died from opioid overdoses in 2024, and more than 10,000 individuals had visited emergency departments due to overdoses.

Sheriff Howell believes “this program recognizes the substance use disorder that contributes to crime, destroys families, and leads to many individuals returning to the justice system. By offering the IMAT program to inmates, individuals can transition back into the community with continued support”.

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The IMAT program uses FDA-approved medication combined with therapy and counseling. These medications help individuals struggling with opioid or alcohol dependence. These medications help reduce cravings, lower relapse risk, and allow participants to focus on rebuilding their lives. This approach is supported by health organizations nationwide as a proven strategy to improve outcomes and reduce overdose deaths and reentry into correctional facilities.

We have strong partnerships with community treatment providers, healthcare professionals, and peer-recovery organizations. Working together, we ensure participants receive comprehensive support, including:

- Clinical screening and individualized treatment planning
- Long-acting, injectable medication for opioid/or alcohol use disorder
- Counseling and health services
- Reentry planning, linking to community care and peer-recovery support
- Ongoing follow-up for long-term success

Approval for the IMAT Program involves a multi-step clinical and administrative process. The individual will have a clinical assessment and medical evaluation to determine if IMAT is “clinically indicated”. Eligibility criteria must be met with the individual and program terms and conditions. Once cleared, the participant will be required to sign a treatment consent.

Our goal is to support individuals during incarceration and to prepare them for a healthier future upon returning home. As the program moves forward, we will track participation and outcomes to evaluate long-term impact. The IMAT program is an important step toward addressing addiction realistically and responsibly, with hope, dignity, and proven treatment.

Sheriff Howell stated, “This program is a critical tool for our detention center to help individuals detox safely and overcome their opioid use disorder while in custody. By addressing the addiction behind the crime, we are not only saving lives but also creating a safer community by reducing the vicious cycle of addiction. We cannot arrest our way out of addiction; we must focus on treatment, recovery, and second chances. When we help people overcome substance use disorder, we reduce crime, save lives, and strengthen our community.”



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