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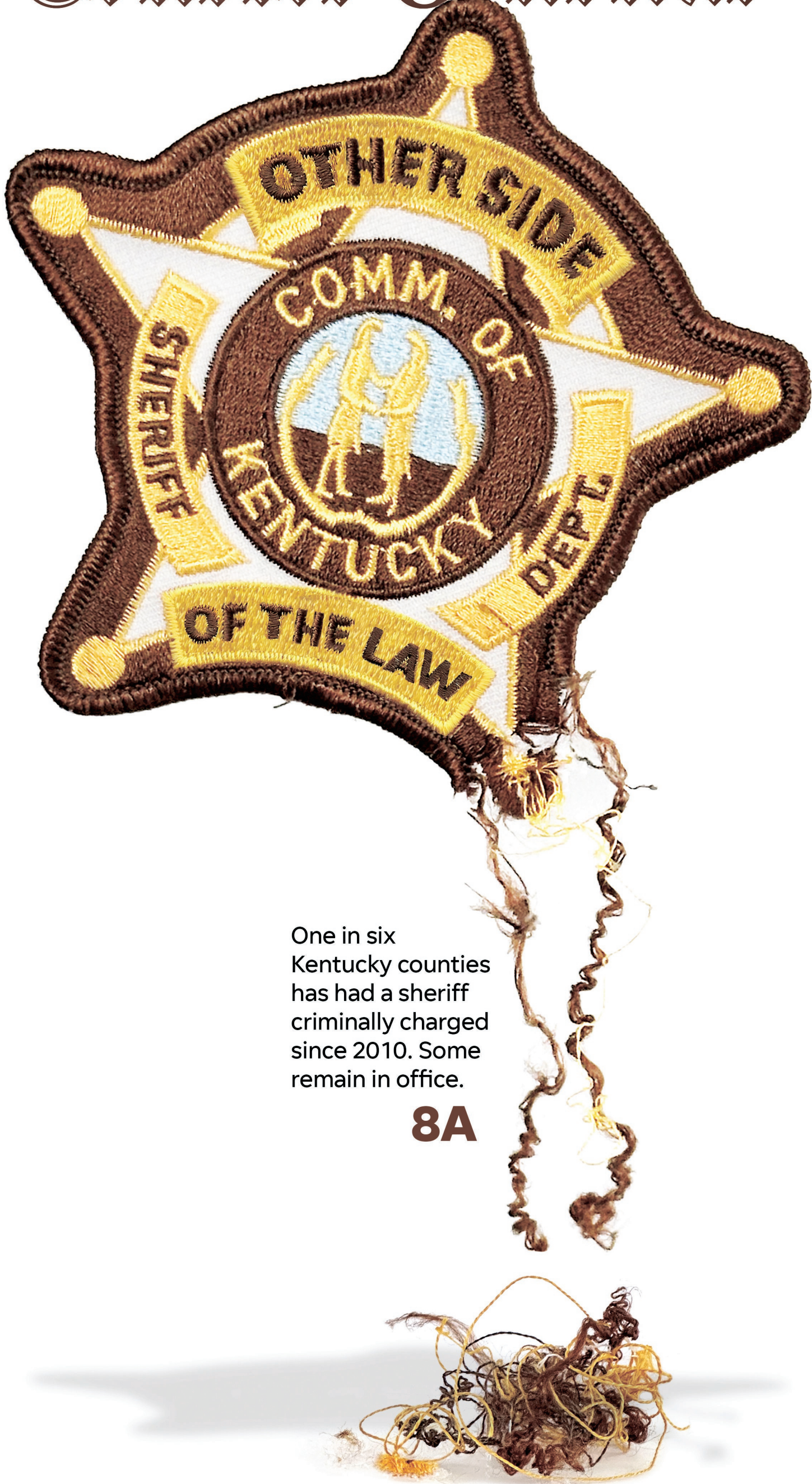
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One in six Kentucky counties has had a sheriff criminally charged since 2010. Some remain in office.

8A

BY LEEZA HERNANDEZ/USA TODAY NETWORK

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'Beholden to no one'

Josh Wood and Keyla Holmes
 Louisville Courier Journal
 USA TODAY NETWORK

CADIZ, KY – Trigg County Sheriff Aaron Acree was ready to resign.

He had just confessed to lying to the FBI about an affair he was having with a woman whom he'd given the security code to the sheriff's office, allowing her to access the secure facility for their intimate rendezvous.

He knew lying to the FBI was bad, but he was trying to do damage control.

"I am prepared to resign and walk away and leave this position without any type of disturbance," Acree, now 36, told an FBI agent in a recorded March 2022 phone call, one day after he attempted to mislead investigators about his relationship with the woman. "I would hope that it was left up to me to explain to my wife why I'm resigning."

But Acree didn't resign. Not then.

Not when he was later investigated for allegedly roughing up and repeatedly threatening to kill a shackled woman in a storage room at the sheriff's office.

Not when he was criminally charged in that incident – and for using his position to secure a free room at the Lake Barkley State Resort Park to carry out his sexual affair.

And not when he took a plea deal on those state-level charges in 2023 and got two years of probation.

Instead, he remains sheriff today, carrying a gun and badge while patrolling this rural county, his criminal record seemingly of no consequence.

Acree stands among a brotherhood of bad sheriffs, a Courier Journal investigation has found, with one in six of Kentucky's 120 counties having at least one sheriff since 2010 criminally charged or convicted over actions they performed while in office.

Several were acquitted, and one died before their case was resolved. But out of closed cases, most were convicted – on charges ranging from DUIs and embezzling taxpayer dollars, to drug trafficking and murder.

The Courier Journal's tally does not include several other sheriffs who were criminally charged or convicted over events that occurred after their time in office.

In many parts of Kentucky, particularly rural counties, sheriff's offices serve as the primary law enforcement agency patrolling the roads and responding to emergencies. Elected by voters, sheriffs have little oversight and can't easily be fired like a city police chief can.

Once in office, they essentially have no boss.

The only individual who can single-handedly initiate removal proceedings is Gov. Andy Beshear.

But despite pleas from local residents for him to give sheriffs the boot, Beshear has so far not done so.

Beshear's inaction – as well as

the failure to act by lawmakers, who can impeach sheriffs and other elected officials – has ensured Acree and several other sheriffs remain in power despite being criminally charged or convicted.

Their continued tenure has damaged trust in law enforcement in multiple communities, leaving some residents afraid to encounter sheriff's office personnel and hesitant to dial 911 in an emergency.

Their incumbency also has the potential to tank criminal cases in their counties if prosecutors believe sheriffs seem too untrustworthy to be put on the stand in court.

One county was left without any local law enforcement to speak of after the person believed to be its sole officer at the time, its sheriff, was arrested.

Beyond Acree, sheriffs who remain in office despite charges or convictions include:

- Robertson County Sheriff Terry Gray, who was arrested for driving drunk twice within a nine-month span, including one incident where he was in uniform operating a departmental vehicle.
- Todd County Sheriff Tracy White, who is facing misdemeanor charges over a 2024 confrontation with a Logan County man.
- Nelson County Sheriff Ramon Pineiroa, who was indicted on multiple felony charges earlier this year related to the seizure and sale of vehicles by his office. His attorney has previously called the charges "baseless."

Some sheriffs, like former Letcher County Sheriff Mickey

Stines, who is charged with gunning down Judge Kevin Mullins in his chambers last year, resign when they are criminally charged or have serious allegations surface.

But others, like Acree, dig in their heels, accountable to no one but voters.

"He's the king. He's the emperor. He created this empire. That came out of his mouth," one of Acree's civilian employees told FBI and Kentucky State Police investigators.

The Courier Journal obtained a recording of that employee's FBI interview, and others, under Kentucky's open records law alongside thousands of pages of documents related to criminal investigations of sheriffs.

The newspaper also reviewed old press clippings, watched hours of video footage, read through voluminous court records and interviewed individuals who experienced alleged misconduct at the hands of Kentucky sheriffs.

To Philip Stinson, a former police officer who studies law enforcement misconduct as a professor at Ohio's Bowling Green State University, the reason why sheriffs like Acree refuse to step down is simple.

"Power," he said. "The power that comes with being the county sheriff – and the lack of oversight and controls in place."

Robert Chase, an associate professor of history at New York's Stony Brook University who is

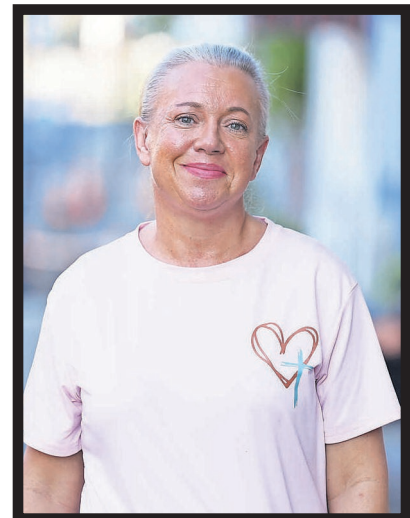
See SHERIFFS, Page 10A

KY sheriffs remain in office with charges, convictions

Trigg County Sheriff Aaron Acree when he was sworn in in August 2020. PROVIDED BY WKDZ



Crystal Smith alleges Trigg County Sheriff Aaron Acree assaulted her and threatened to kill her while she was handcuffed and shackled in a sheriff's office supply room in January 2022. Acree later took a plea deal on charges resulting from the incident. SCOTT UTTERBACK/ COURIER JOURNAL



Kameron Smith died at 11 years old and is buried in Trigg County. Crystal Smith, his mother, got high on heroin and broke into Sheriff Acree's house. She then accused Acree of police brutality after the arrest. SCOTT UTTERBACK/ COURIER JOURNAL





ILLUSTRATION BY SPENCER HOLLADAY/USA TODAY NETWORK; AND GETTY IMAGES

Kentucky counties since 2010 where sheriffs have been criminally charged

Josh Wood

Louisville Courier Journal | USA TODAY NETWORK

Here's a list of counties that have had a sheriff criminally charged since 2010.

Barren County

Former Barren County Sheriff Christopher Eaton was sentenced to 18 months in prison in 2013 on federal obstruction of justice charges. The DOJ said Eaton directed deputies to falsify reports regarding a suspect who was beaten by deputies.

Breckenridge County

Former Breckenridge County Sheriff Todd Pate was arrested by Kentucky State Police in 2015 for terroristic threatening, DUI and other charges. In 2019, he was arrested for a second DUI. He resigned in 2020.

Bullitt County

Former Bullitt County Sheriff David Greenwell was federally charged with obstruction of justice and aiding a conspiracy to distribute marijuana in 2017. A jury found him not guilty in 2018.

Carroll County

Former Carroll County Sheriff Jamie Kinman pleaded guilty to stealing painkillers, including from a terminal cancer patient. He took a plea deal that allowed him to avoid prison time, but required he immediately step down as sheriff.

Graves County

Former Graves County Sheriff Dewayne Redmon was indicted in 2018 on state-level charges alleging he took a hydrocodone from a drug drop box for personal use. He won re-election despite the charges, but died in office in early 2019.

Greenup County

Former Greenup County Sheriff Keith Cooper was sentenced to 13 months in federal prison in 2023 after entering a "no contest" plea on charges he misappropriated funds and ammunition. The DOJ said he wrongfully withdrew funds seized in drug investigations and took nearly \$30,000 of taxpayer-funded ammunition.

Harlan County

Former Harlan County Sheriff Marvin Lipfird pleaded guilty to

Since 2010, one in six of Kentucky's 120 counties has had a sheriff criminally charged or convicted over events that occurred while in office, a Courier Journal investigation has found. Some of those sheriffs remain in office.

federal charges of misusing public funds in 2017. The DOJ said he spent the money on personal expenses like "food, alcohol, hotel rooms, and a subscription to a dating website." He was sentenced to three months in jail and five months of home incarceration.

Hickman County

Former Hickman County Sheriff Mark Green was indicted on a felony-level abuse of public trust charge in 2019, accused of writing himself checks using public funds. He pleaded guilty to an amended-down attempted theft charge and avoided prison time.

LaRue County

Former LaRue County Sheriff Bobby Carlton Shoffner pleaded guilty to a federal charge of embezzling taxpayer dollars in 2017. He admitted to embezzling nearly \$22,000 in property tax receipts over 2011-12 and using a county credit card on things like "DirectTV, golf shoes, and Abercrombie & Fitch." He was sentenced to three years of probation.

Letcher County

Former Letcher County Sheriff Mickey Stines was charged with murder for the 2024 shooting of District Court Judge Kevin Mullins, which was captured on camera. Stines stepped down following his arrest after Gov. Andy Beshear threatened his removal. Stines is currently awaiting trial.

Nelson County

Nelson County Sheriff Ramon Pineiroa was indicted on multiple felony charges in March 2025 related to the improper seizure of vehicles under Kentucky's asset forfeiture law and the sales of those seized vehicles. He is scheduled to stand trial in October. His attorney has previously called the charges "baseless."

Nicholas County

Former Nicholas County Sheriff Dick Garrett pleaded guilty to theft and abuse of public trust charges in 2011. Prosecutors said Garrett illicitly took tens of thousands of dollars from a federal asset forfeiture account and used the money "like a personal checking account." He avoided jail.

Owsley County

Former Owsley County Sheriff Brent Lynch was arrested in 2021 after being accused of hitting a girl during a fight at a Perry County high school basketball game. Lynch, who was on the Owsley County team's coaching staff, was found not guilty in 2022.

Robertson County

Robertson County Sheriff Gray was arrested for DUIs twice in a nine-month period 2023-24. In one instance, he was in uniform and had been operating a department vehicle. He remains in office.

Simpson County

Former Simpson County Sheriff Chris Cline was indicted in 2014 on 41 counts of trying to obtain a controlled substance by fraud and one count of official misconduct. A judge dismissed the case in 2023 after prosecutors declined further prosecution. Cline resigned in 2013 citing health reasons.

Spencer County

Former Spencer County Sheriff

Steve Coulter was indicted in 2011 on tampering with public records and official misconduct charges. He entered an Alford plea – a type of guilty plea where the party maintains their innocence – on an official misconduct charge and avoided jail.

Todd County

Sheriff Tracy White is charged with misdemeanor-level harassment and menacing over a 2024 incident where he showed up at the home of a Logan County man one night wearing gloves and threatened to "get [his] a-- another way." He is scheduled to stand trial in November.

Trigg County

Trigg County Sheriff Aaron Acree pleaded guilty to multiple misdemeanors in 2023 and is on probation. Most charges were related to an incident where he allegedly roughed up a shackled woman at his office. He also used his position to secure a free hotel room where he engaged in an affair.

Acree's predecessor, Jason Barnes, was sentenced to 90 days of house arrest and three years of probation in 2022 over charges related to providing alcohol to a Trigg County Sheriff's Office intern who was in high school. A lawsuit from that former intern alleged Barnes and several sheriff's deputies sexually groomed her and had sex with her once she turned 18. He resigned in 2020 as the criminal investigation was ongoing.

Webster County

Former Webster County Sheriff Donald Jones pleaded guilty to witness tampering and official misconduct in 2023. He was sentenced to three months of home incarceration and three years of probation. He died in December 2024.

Whitley County

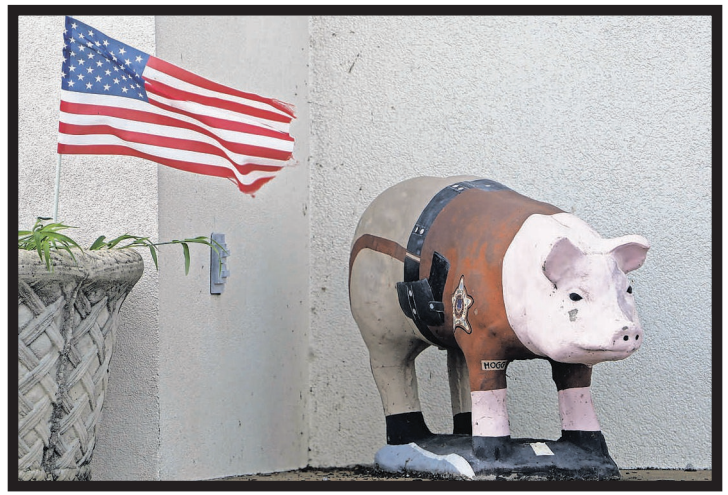
Former Whitley County Sheriff Lawrence Hodge was sentenced to more than 15 years in prison in 2011 for conspiring with drug dealers to distribute prescription pills, turning a blind eye to drug trafficking and embezzling taxpayer dollars. He was brought down by local journalists.

Josh Wood is an investigative reporter who focuses on public safety and government. Get in touch at jwood@courier-journal.com or on X at [@JWoodJourno](https://twitter.com/JWoodJourno).



A statue of a pig in front of the Trigg County Sheriff's Office in Cadiz, which is home to an annual country ham festival and the town is decorated with many pig statutes.

SCOTT UTTERBACK/
COURIER JOURNAL



Sheriffs

Continued from Page 8A

working on a book about sheriffs, was similarly unsurprised.

"Sheriffs wield so much power in their counties," he said, "that they can really act like kings."

'My way'

Crystal Smith was deep in the throes of heroin addiction, driving despondently one day in January 2022 around Cadiz, the quiet Trigg County seat of 2,500 people known for its annual country ham festival.

The drugs had been her way of numbing the razor-sharp pain gnawing away at her since her 11-year-old son, Kameron, died in a gun accident just months before.

"I was in a really bad place," Smith, 48, told The Courier Journal in a recent interview.

Her destination, that day, was meant to be her son's grave. She said she was praying, surrendering to God, when she felt something pull her off course.

Before she knew it, she was unlawfully entering someone else's home.

It happened to belong to Acree, the county sheriff.

She was soon arrested by Cadiz Police, who, according to an arrest citation, said she admitted to taking items from Acree's home and putting them in her car.

Police also found heroin in her purse.

Smith, a former restaurant server, knew she was going to jail. Instead, Trigg County Jailer James Hughes drove Smith to the sheriff's office, an industrial-looking building on the eastern outskirts of Cadiz. Once there, Acree brought Smith, who was handcuffed and shackled, into a small storage room.

Inside, Smith said, Acree picked her up, pinned her against the wall and repeatedly threatened to kill her if she ever came to his home again.

As they were exiting, she said, Acree pushed her from behind, causing her to slam into the concrete floor, which she said left her heavily bruised.

Hughes, the jailer, later told investigators he had heard thuds and shouting inside.

"(Acree) said: 'Don't you ever come to my house, I'll f---ing kill you.' He said that three or four times," Hughes said.

He added: "She couldn't defend herself. ... She was belly-chained and shackled and handcuffed. She was helpless."

Sheriff's office employees in the building told investigators they also heard Acree threatening Smith's life.

When Acree emerged with Smith, Hughes said he told Acree he was being too rough.

"(Acree) said: 'Sometimes you gotta do things my way,'" Hughes recalled.

Acree has denied threatening Smith or pushing her to the ground, according to a deposition in a lawsuit she filed. Acree said he requested Hughes bring Smith by his office



Jared Kennedy, pictured July 25, says Sheriff Aaron Acree attacked him while arresting him one night.

SCOTT UTTERBACK/COURIER JOURNAL

The only individual who can single-handedly initiate removal proceedings is Gov. Andy Beshear. But despite pleas from local residents for him to give sheriffs the boot, Beshear has so far not done so.

Cadiz, pictured July 24, is in Trigg County and is home to Sheriff Aaron Acree. He is accused of police brutality by Crystal Smith after she was arrested for breaking into the sheriff's house.

SCOTT UTTERBACK/
COURIER JOURNAL

so he could check her for additional stolen items, notably a ring. Smith admits to taking a ring from Acree's home, which was recovered once she was booked in jail.

Appointed sheriff in 2020, Acree, a former Cadiz cop and state trooper, was supposed to restore the good name of the Trigg County Sheriff's Office after his predecessor stepped down amid allegations he and several deputies sexually groomed a sheriff's office intern who was in high school.

That predecessor, Jason Barnes, pleaded guilty to providing alcohol to a minor and witness tampering and, like Acree, admitted to lying to investigators.

The county agreed to pay \$100,000 to settle a lawsuit from the woman, who alleged she was sexually groomed during her internship and had sex with Barnes, sheriff's deputies and a Cadiz Police officer after she turned 18.

Now, Acree was well on his way to being the county's second criminally convicted sheriff in a row.

By the time federal and state investigators began looking at Acree's confrontation with Smith, they had already probed his on-the-clock affair.

Despite his confession to the FBI, Acree maintained that an encounter he had with the woman at Lake Barkley occurred in a room he paid for with his personal credit card.

But Kentucky State Police later deemed that to be untrue. An email from the hotel's manager told higher-ups Acree requested a room "to observe a potential drug deal," and a receipt later showed Acree paid for the room only after investigators asked him about it.

"This clearly shows Sheriff Acree was lying during our interview," a KSP investigator wrote.

Both KSP and the FBI looked into Acree's affair and the incident with Smith, but only state-level charges were filed. Neither the FBI nor KSP agreed to interview requests from The Courier Journal about the case.

In 2023, after Acree pleaded guilty to two counts of official misconduct and two counts of menacing related to the incidents, Beshear publicly chastised the lawman's behavior as "wrong and inappropriate."

But Beshear never tried to remove him.

In a written statement sent to The Courier Journal through his attorney, Acree characterized the charges as resulting from "personal matters" during his first election campaign in 2022, which he won despite the ongoing investigation.

While Acree said he took responsibility for his interaction with Smith, he reiterated his denial of ever assaulting or threatening her.

"More than anything else, my election aptly demonstrates how

these overblown past allegations against me lack credibility within the community and likely come from people with self-interested lawsuits or political ambitions," he said, adding that support for his office "has only grown stronger and larger" since.

In 2022, Acree defeated a write-in candidate, Michael Sandbrink, a former Trigg County Sheriff's Office deputy who was fired by Acree amid the investigation.

Sandbrink – who is running for sheriff again next year – and another deputy filed a 2022 lawsuit against Acree alleging they were fired for going to the FBI to report potential misconduct by the sheriff.

'Beholden to no one'

There are more than 3,000 sheriff's offices nationwide, ranging from one-man agencies like Kentucky's Robertson County Sheriff's Office to the behemoth Los Angeles County Sheriff's Department, which has more than 10,000 sworn officers.

In 2020, sheriff's deputies made up about a quarter of all law enforcement personnel, according to the U.S. Department of Justice.

As elected officials, sheriffs' tenures can be long. Jefferson County Sheriff John Aubrey, who recently announced he will not run for reelection next year, has been in office a quarter-century.

In Louisville's Jefferson County, the sheriff's office role is limited to things like tax collection, evictions and court security, while police take the lead on most law enforcement activities.

But elsewhere, they are the primary law enforcement agency.

Sheriffs occupy a unique place in America, said Chase, the Stony Brook University professor, looming large in American imagination and representing the very heart of democracy.

Their elected nature grants sheriffs enormous power. In fact, sheriff is a political position as much as it is a matter of law enforcement, Chase said.

"And that means they are beholden to no one," he said. "They are not beholden to a mayor, as a police chief is. ... They are their own political entity beholden to the people themselves."

'It's kinda scary, you know'

Several counties east of Cadiz, Logan County resident Adam Weatherford enjoyed taking his banjo and his dog, Toby, down to a nearby creek where the 40-year-old forklift driver would strum tunes as Toby chased beavers and tried to catch fish.

See SHERIFFS, Page 11A





LEFT: Todd County Sheriff Tracy White talks to a KSP investigator on May 11, 2024, in a still image taken from body camera footage.
PROVIDED BY KSP



RIGHT: Logan County resident Adam Weatherford was confronted by Todd County Sheriff Tracy White one night. White was later criminally charged.
SCOTT UTTERBACK/COURIER JOURNAL

Sheriffs

Continued from Page 10A

But over the course of months last year, he said, a group of teens on four-wheelers and dirt bikes would repeatedly break the tranquility, revving their engines as they drove by, before doubling back to where he was parked.

"They would come find me, wherever I was," he told The Courier Journal.

One night in May 2024, after another run-in with the kids, Weatherford was about to jump in the shower when the top lawman from the neighboring county – Todd County Sheriff Tracy White – showed up to his door.

White, 55, was out of uniform, wearing a Kentucky Peace Officers Association T-shirt, but Weatherford knew who he was.

He was also wearing gloves – "in case things went south," White later explained to KSP.

During an insult-laced tirade that Weatherford filmed, White accused Weatherford of "threatening my kids" and ramming one of the children's vehicles – an incident he said was captured on camera.

There was one threat from the sheriff that chilled Weatherford: "I'm going to get your a-- another way, buddy."

White made the remark right after Weatherford said he would have already been in jail if he'd rammed the child's vehicle, according to video footage viewed by The Courier Journal.

"It's kinda scary, you know. For about six months, every day, in the afternoon I'd drive by Sharon Grove, and I knew he lived there. I was pretty nervous," Weatherford said, referring to the community where White lives.

At one point during the encounter, Weatherford said, White struck the phone he was using to record, causing it to hit Weatherford's face and injure his lip.

White was indicted on harassment and menacing charges last December. Scheduled to stand trial in November, he faces a maximum penalty of 90 days in jail for each charge if convicted.

The third-term sheriff told KSP he was not at Weatherford's door as law enforcement the night of the confrontation, saying "I went over there as a daddy is what I done."

However, White would tell KSP his children were not actually present that day, but that they had previously complained to him about Weatherford. Instead, White said he had received a phone call from a person he knew claiming Weatherford was "harassing" children riding four-wheelers.

He denied threatening Weatherford or touching him.

Weeks after he was indicted, White's wife filed a petition for an emergency protective order against him, claiming he pulled her hair and slapped her while upset and drinking.

While several individuals petitioned Beshear to remove White from office after the video of his confrontation with Weatherford was posted online, he remains Todd County's sheriff.

Repeated messages to White's

attorney seeking an interview or comment were not returned, nor were messages left with the Todd County Sheriff's Office.

'It wasn't worth my life'

Sheriff issues are not limited to Western Kentucky.

In the commonwealth's least populous county, north-central Kentucky's Robertson County, Sheriff Terry Gray remains in office despite racking up two DUIs in a nine-month span in 2023-24 – incidents that prompted all five of the 2,200-person county's magistrates to formally request Beshear sack Gray, to no avail.

In an August 2024 incident, Gray allegedly overturned a tractor while driving drunk.

And in a December 2023 incident, he was arrested while in uniform after driving his department vehicle with a blood alcohol content more than twice the legal limit.

Ahead of the in-uniform DUI, Gray, 48, showed up at the county's public school complex where he got into a heated confrontation with the district's school resource officer and superintendent, whom both have said Gray appeared to be drunk and refused to leave.

During that encounter, Gray radioed into dispatch requesting state troopers, saying his jurisdiction was being challenged by the school resource officer, Kenny Brockman. Gray told dispatch he was at the school "trying to watch traffic – traffic flow."

At times during the confrontation, the sheriff placed his hand on his gun, Brockman and the superintendent said.

In cell phone video footage reviewed by The Courier Journal, Gray can be seen taking out handcuffs and waving them at Brockman, who told the paper Gray also threatened to arrest him. Brockman had previously told Gray he planned to run against him in the next sheriff's election, Brockman said.

"I have the f---ing power, I will shut this place down," Gray said, Superintendent Sanford Holbrook recounted in a KSP interview.

Fearing for the safety of the hundreds of children inside the schools, a secretary told KSP she kept her hand hovering above a button to activate a school-wide lockdown.

Holbrook told The Courier Journal he feared he was going to be shot and, weeks later, unsuccessfully submitted his resignation to the school board over what happened.

"It wasn't worth my life working as superintendent," he told The Courier Journal.

After Gray left the schools, KSP troopers tracked him down to his home where they arrested him for DUI. While KSP spent dozens of hours investigating events at the schools that afternoon, no charges were filed except for the DUI charge.

After the incident, an attorney representing the district's school board sent a letter to Gray barring him from school property and asserting the district would only contact KSP for emergencies, even though, according to Holbrook, it



A mugshot of Robertson County Sheriff Terry Gray following a DUI arrest. PROVIDED BY BOURBON COUNTY DETENTION CENTER

"Sheriffs wield so much power in their counties that they can really act like kings."

Robert Chase
An associate professor of history at New York's Stony Brook University

takes troopers 30 minutes to an hour to respond.

Brockman, letters from concerned citizens to Beshear and the top prosecutor for Robertson County all described Gray as the county's sole law enforcement officer. Robertson County Judge-Executive Valerie Grigson Miley told The Courier Journal the sheriff's office has a "deputized" administrative assistant, but declined to answer a question about whether that person had arrest powers, saying "I really can't discuss it."

Gray avoided jail time for the DUIs, with the court hitting pause on a 90-day jail sentence so long as he completed a rehab program and commits no new violations through 2026.

Fleming County Attorney Monica Hill, the special prosecutor in Gray's DUI cases, told The Courier Journal she has second thoughts about not more aggressively pushing for Gray to resign.

"I understand the reason that people are upset – I would be upset, too," she said. "... I think resignation is something that he should have done. And I probably should have pushed it harder, but I did not."

In an October 2024 letter to Beshear calling for Gray's removal, Robertson County magistrates argued he could no longer do his job because he did not have a license.

"Further," they added, "the Fiscal Court has lost confidence in his ability to actually perform the job, even if [he had] a valid license."

Contacted by The Courier Journal by phone, Gray said "no comment" when asked about the incidents.

'You always have to look behind your back'

Following her arrest for breaking into Acree's home in Cadiz, Smith spent more than half a year in jail.

She felt safe in her cell, but less so when she got out, constantly afraid she or her family would run into Acree.

Smith used to work as a restaurant server, but no longer does, afraid he'd come in one day.

Now she's left Trigg County and works at a factory where you need a keycard to get inside.

Smith thought, once everything was done with, that maybe Acree would step down, or that he would somehow be ousted.

"Because it makes sense: Why do you want someone to be the sheriff to your town, and protect you, when this took place?" she asked.

That did not happen.

Now she avoids Trigg County, only crossing the county line once or twice a month to visit her son's grave.

"You never know what's going to happen. You always have to look behind your back," she said.

Josh Wood is an investigative reporter who focuses on public safety and government. He can be reached at jwood@courier-journal.com or on X at @JWoodJourno.

Keyla Holmes was The Courier Journal's Ida B. Wells investigative intern during the summer of 2025. She is a senior at Texas State University.

COMING MONDAY

Gov. Andy Beshear has the power to remove convicted sheriffs. Why hasn't he?



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Pollio: 'Nothing has changed'

Says concern about JCPS finances meant to 'scare'

Krista Johnson
Louisville Courier Journal
USA TODAY NETWORK

Two days after leaders of Kentucky's largest school system were told for the first time that bankruptcy might be on the horizon, the district's former super-

intendent argued its financial state has not changed, while board members argued they've been kept in the dark for several years.

Former Jefferson County Public Schools Superintendent Marty Pollio, who retired from the district in June, spoke with The Courier Journal on Sept. 18 following a Jefferson County Board of Education meeting where finance leaders said overspending had put the district in a dire financial state, assets will



Pollio

need to be sold and under Pollio's leadership, financial reports were altered before they were given to the board.

The news blindsided the board, with members questioning why they weren't previously warned against making several large purchases in recent years and whether they should trust district employees who failed to sound

the alarm sooner.

The board was told \$80 million needs to be cut from the 2026-2027 budget — a higher amount than the \$50 million they were quoted in May, though smaller than the \$100 million current Superintendent Brian Yearwood cited during events in August.

The Courier Journal previously asked why the amount Yearwood was stating

See JCPS, Page 2A



OTHER SIDE OF THE LAW PART TWO



ILLUSTRATION BY SPENCER HOLLADAY, USA TODAY NETWORK/GETTY IMAGES

Massie, Paul vote against stopgap bill

Measure aimed to avert government shutdown

Lucas Aulbach
Louisville Courier Journal
USA TODAY NETWORK

A Kentucky congressman was one of two Republicans in the U.S. House of Representatives to vote against legislation that would help avert a looming government shutdown.

You probably won't be shocked by who was against it. U.S. Rep. Thomas Massie, the controversial Northern Kentucky Republican known as "Mr. No" for his frequent votes against bills advancing through the chamber, held true to his nickname during the vote on Sept. 19.

Massie voted against the legislation, he wrote on social media, because he believes the filing is "a 'continuing resolution' of (former President Joe) Biden's last omnibus, and an extension of (former President Barack) Obama's domestic spying law." Politico reported Massie said before the vote he would not support the continuing resolution unless it cuts spending.

The other GOP representative to join Massie in voting against the legislation was U.S. Rep. Victoria Spartz, an Indiana Republican from a district just north of Indianapolis.

The resolution passed through the

See SHUTDOWN, Page 2A



Rep. Thomas Massie, R-Kentucky, seen on June 27, voted against legislation that would help avert a looming government shutdown on Sept. 19. ELIZABETH FRANTZ/REUTERS

'I was shocked that he did not take action'

Josh Wood Louisville Courier Journal | USA TODAY NETWORK

CADIZ, Ky. — Tammy Mason has always been a big supporter of Gov. Andy Beshear, canvassing for the Democrat in bright-red Trigg County during both of his campaigns.

Last time around, the 57-year-old boutique owner estimates she knocked on nearly 1,000 doors in this rural Western Kentucky county, which Beshear lost handily in both 2019 and 2023.

But as Beshear potentially sets his sights on the White House, there is one sticking point that has Mason rethinking her support: the governor's failure to remove Trigg County's criminally convicted sheriff from office.

"We should matter," she told The Courier Journal. "West Kentucky should matter. Especially if you have higher aspirations: If you can't take care of your little town in West Kentucky, you can't take care of the United States."

In late 2023, Beshear publicly said he would examine removing Trigg County Sheriff Aaron Acree, who had pleaded guilty to four misdemeanor charges stemming from incidents where he allegedly roughed up and threatened to kill a shackled woman and abused his position to secure a free hotel room for a sexual affair.

However, nearly two years later, Beshear — the only person who can

See LAW, Page 8A

Despite pleas, Beshear still hasn't removed convicted sheriffs

More inside

Charges dropped against Nelson County sheriff. **6A**

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Law

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occurred as part of their official duty. In initiating removal proceedings, Kentucky law requires the governor put his charges, which must be accompanied by witness affidavits, in writing.

Under the law, the governor then would consider testimony from both sides and, if determining the officer is guilty of neglect of duty, can order the sheriff out of office.

At a press conference the week after Acree pleaded guilty in late 2023, Beshear called the sheriff's actions "wrong and inappropriate" and said he would examine the removal process, as well as the details of the case.

He also added that the process had not been used since the 1950s.

"I will tell you where we are now — because, admittedly, it's a new one to me — is understanding that process under state law, since most of us haven't seen it before," he said during the Dec. 7, 2023, press conference, adding that his office would be happy to provide an update once they looked into it further.

That update never came. Meanwhile, Beshear received letter after letter from Trigg County residents calling for Acree's removal, according to documents obtained by The Courier Journal under Kentucky's open records law.

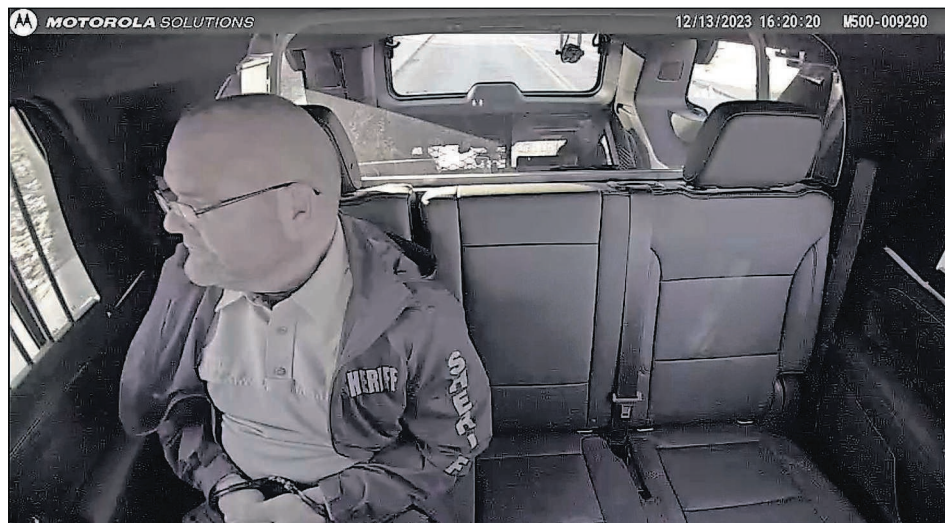
"Each and every visitor to and resident of Trigg County has a reason and a right to be afraid of [Acree]," read a Dec. 13, 2023, letter to Beshear. "We should not have to live in fear."

As late as April 2024, members of Beshear's staff told concerned residents the governor's office was continuing to look at the removal process.

However, in correspondence from July and September 2024, the governor's office recommended the husband of Crystal Smith — the woman whose alleged assault was at the center of most of Acree's charges — look to the legislature to impeach Acree and made no mention of the governor's ability to remove him.

Beshear also received letters requesting the removal of sheriffs from other counties, including Robertson, where Sheriff Terry Gray collected two DUIs in the span of nine months.

"If this were a truck driver, his profes-



Robertson County Sheriff Terry Gray is seen handcuffed following a December 2023 DUI arrest in this screengrab from in-vehicle Kentucky State Police video footage. PROVIDED BY KENTUCKY STATE POLICE

sional license would be revoked," wrote one Robertson County resident. "A drunk in a semi is no more dangerous than a drunk in a cruiser with a gun and a badge."

Separately, Robertson County's five magistrates wrote to Beshear last October requesting Gray be removed.

A Courier Journal open records request to the governor's office for all written responses to Robertson County residents by the governor or his office — including any response to the formal request by the magistrates — yielded no documents.

Contacted by The Courier Journal, Gray declined to comment.

Removal rare, but not unprecedented

While Beshear has not sought to remove Acree or Gray — or explained his reasoning not to — he did more vociferously threaten to oust one sheriff last year: former Letcher County Sheriff Mickey Stines, who is charged with murder in the caught-on-camera shooting of Judge Kevin Mullins.

In a Sept. 25, 2024, letter to Stines, Beshear's general counsel, S. Travis Mayo, gave Stines two days to step down or face removal.

"If you do not tender your resignation, the Governor will move forward with removal under KRS 63.100," Mayo wrote, referring to the Kentucky law that

permits the governor to remove peace officers for neglect of duty.

At a press conference the next day, Beshear again pushed for Stines to step down.

"If he doesn't, there is a removal process that the governor is able to start," he said, adding again that it hasn't been done in "decades" and would likely take a minimum of six months to complete.

Stines complied with the governor's request and avoided removal. He is currently in jail awaiting trial.

That last removal of a sheriff, which Beshear referred to, came in 1957 when Gov. A.B. "Happy" Chandler successfully ousted Perry County Sheriff William M. Cornett after the lawman punched out a Lexington attorney during a heated meeting in a judge's chambers.

According to accounts at the time, Cornett struck attorney John Young Brown, who was representing two men accused of killing a sheriff's deputy, after the lawyer told a judge he would not be speaking to him like that if the judge was not "flanked by pistol-packin' sheriffs."

About three months after the incident, Chandler initiated the process to remove Cornett for neglect of duty.

Three commissioners appointed by Chandler to review the evidence each found Cornett guilty.

The governor signed an order removing Cornett from office in November 1957, roughly six months after he initiated proceedings.

Three decades earlier, another governor tried and failed to remove another Perry County sheriff, Tolbert Holliday, over a litany of alleged misconduct, including gambling and a drunken fight at a pool hall where Holliday reportedly pistol-whipped a "crippled" 20-year-old man.

Impeachment through the legislature — the other venue for removal — has happened more recently, though not for sheriffs.

In 2023, former Commonwealth's Attorney Ronnie Goldy Jr., the top prosecutor in several eastern Kentucky counties, was impeached for trading favors for nude photos with a defendant. He resigned before the impeachment hearings began but was ultimately convicted in the Senate's first impeachment trial in 135 years.

That same year, former Christian County Commonwealth's Attorney Rick Boly also stepped down after a resolution to begin impeachment proceedings against him was filed in the House.

'Legislation needs to change'

School resource officer Kenny Brockman found himself in a heated confrontation with Gray, the Robertson County sheriff, right before the county's top lawman was arrested for an in-uniform DUI in 2023.

Brockman and the school's superintendent told Kentucky State Police that Gray, who appeared to be intoxicated, refused to leave the county's school complex, repeatedly put his hand on his gun and, at one point, threatened Brockman with arrest.

Their argument can't be heard in video footage of the incident, but Gray can be seen waving handcuffs at one point and, according to KSP, placing his hand on his firearm at another.

But despite his DUI that day and collecting another one less than nine months later, Gray remains in office.

"It's almost like people that's elected have it different — they get better treatment versus the regular Joe on the street. If it had been me, you or somebody else, they would have probably jailed us. ... It's just like a different set of standards is set for elected sheriffs." Brockman, who is planning to run for sheriff next year, said in an interview with The Courier Journal. "...Legislation needs to change

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Ali

Continued from Page 3A

“consciousness as a Muslim minister” and his “personal convictions” prompted his decision to reject the call to be inducted in the armed services.”

“As to the threat voiced by certain elements to ‘strip’ me of my title, this is merely a continuation of the same artifi-

cially induced prejudice and discrimination,” Ali wrote. “Regardless of the difference in my outlook, I insist upon my right to pursue my livelihood in accordance with the same rights granted to other men and women who have disagreed with the policies of whatever Administration was in power at the time.”

Officials said Ali’s actions “helped galvanize the growing anti-war movement.”

“By taking this step, Ali not only

faced criminal charges and imprisonment but was also stripped of his boxing titles, depriving him of his livelihood for four years. This would prove to be his longest — and greatest — fight,” Christie’s officials wrote.

In an interview with The Athletic, Rasheda Ali Walsh — Ali’s daughter who was in possession of the card — described it as “a freedom piece” that will be “relevant for hundreds of years to come.”

Wanting the card to stay with her family, she gave the card to her sons, Nicco Ali Walsh and Biaggio Ali Walsh.

“But we decided that Daddy belongs to the world and his message of inspiration should be shared with the world,” Rasheda Ali Walsh told The Athletic. “In a perfect world, I would want this item on display in an institution where people can not only be inspired by his courage and conviction ... but also be educated about it and empowered by it.”

Law

Continued from Page 10A

on that.”

Brockman would like to see additional avenues put in place to remove sheriffs — or ways to strip them of funding, forcing them to step down.

Darnall, the prosecutor in Acree’s case, suggested the legislature look at making official misconduct an automatically removable offense when it meets certain criteria — perhaps misuse of funds or a crime of dishonesty.

In recent years, there have been proposed legislative fixes that would have laid a path for citizens to remove sheriffs like Acree and Gray without going through the governor or lawmakers.

However, those bills ultimately failed.

A bill filed by former Rep. Dean Schamore (D-Hardinsburg) and Rep. George Brown Jr. (D-Fayette) for the 2020 legislative session would have allowed county voters to demand a recall election for elected peace officers like sheriffs or jailers for neglect of duty.

The bill’s definition of neglect of duty proposed in the bill was broader than what the governor could consider when removing a sheriff, including things like:

- Conviction of any felony while in office.
- Two Class A misdemeanor convictions within an eight-year period while in office.
- Conduct that “adversely affects the administration of the office” and “rights and interests of the public.”
- Lack of physical or mental fitness.
- Incompetence.

With two Class A misdemeanor convictions under his belt, Trigg County’s sheriff, Acree, would have met that threshold for neglect of duty.

However, the bill stalled in committee and never received a hearing.

Ahead of the 2021 legislative session, Rep. James Tipton (R-Taylorsville) filed a bill proposing a constitutional amendment that would subject all Kentucky



Rep. James Tipton stood on the House floor Jan. 7 as the 2025 General Assembly was gavelled in at the state Capitol in Frankfort.

JEFF FAUGHENDER/COURIER JOURNAL & USA TODAY NETWORK

elected officials — except judges — to be subject to recall by voters.

“It’s not just sheriffs — we hear a lot of things about malfeasance from local officials that cause concern,” Tipton told The Courier Journal. “Usually when somebody gets caught with something, the honorable thing to do is to resign and drop out and let somebody go ahead and fill that role, but not everybody is honorable.”

Like the Democrat-backed bill the year before, Tipton’s proposal never received a hearing.

Former Fleming County Sheriff Jerry Wagner is the executive director of the Kentucky Sheriffs’ Association, which provides yearly in-service training for sheriffs and advocates to support the position in the commonwealth.

However, the organization has limited ability to sanction members and has no ability to strip their powers; after Gray’s DUIs, the association barred him from training, but that was all they could do, Wagner said.

The former sheriff is open to potential legislation that would make it easier to hold sheriffs guilty of misconduct ac-

countable, but still believes sheriffs bear a high level of accountability as they answer to voters.

“But if you look at it, it’s not a terrible system that we have in place,” he said. “... You’re tried by the peers and by the voters of your county every four years.”

Few options

Experts say there are few good options in place to hold sheriffs involved in misconduct accountable. Farhang Heydari, a Vanderbilt University Law School assistant professor who studies sheriffs, said while the removal of sheriffs is not unheard of across the country, it is not common.

In creating removal mechanisms, he warned, states have to strike a difficult balance: If it is too easy, you may see removals used as a political bludgeon against ideological opponents by governors and legislators, as well as state government overstepping on local matters.

“At the same time,” he said, “if you make it too hard to remove, or it’s too infrequent, then what does accountability look like? It’s really just elections.”

Other experts also saw the removal of sheriffs as rare nationwide.

“It’s really only the most gross offenses that are going to remove sheriffs from office — and even then, you’re not getting a fundamental reform of the office, or what led to the problem to begin with,” said Emily Farris, a Texas Christian University associate political science professor and the co-author of the book “The Power of the Badge: Sheriffs and Inequality in the United States.”

Revoking a sheriff’s law enforcement certification is one possible avenue for states to address misconduct, Farris said, but that only works in states that require sheriffs to be certified, like Texas or Missouri.

Kentucky has no such requirement. And while sheriffs can be booted from office by the voters, those elections can be an uphill battle.

Sheriff elections, experts warned, notoriously favor the incumbent more than most other kinds of contests and are often down-ballot races that can es-

cape public scrutiny.

For healthy, democratic elections, voters need more than one viable candidate to choose from said Zoe Nemerever, an assistant professor of political science at Alabama’s Auburn University who studies sheriffs.

But, she added, that rarely happens in sheriff races.

“That just does not count as democracy at its basic sense,” Nemerever said.

The most likely person to run for sheriff, she said, would be a sheriff’s deputy.

“They’re the ones who have experience and interest in the position, but nobody wants to run against their boss,” she said. “And they’re, in often cases, actively discouraged from doing so.”

Robert Chase, an associate professor of history at New York’s Stony Brook University who is writing a book on sheriffs, said while incredibly powerful in many parts of the United States, sheriff’s offices often escape the scrutiny police do.

“People don’t know enough about how the system and the office of the sheriff operates — and if they did, we might have a movement that would ask to rethink the power of the sheriff the way we’ve asked to rethink municipal and urban police departments,” he said.

Back on the Tennessee-Kentucky border in rural Trigg County, Mason still hopes Beshear will remove Acree, who is running for re-election.

She feels like if she had just 30 minutes of the governor’s time to explain things, he would come around.

“He’s a really caring guy,” she explained.

But Mason is also moving on and looking for other, more surefire avenues; the self-proclaimed “purple” Democrat said she is now helping a Republican who plans to primary Acree with his campaign.

“There’s no reason this man should still be wearing a badge,” she said.

Josh Wood is an investigative reporter who focuses on public safety and government. He can be reached at jwood@courier-journal.com or on X at [@JWoodJourno](https://twitter.com/JWoodJourno).

Obituaries

TODAY’S DEATH NOTICES

| Name | Age | Town, State | Passed | Arrangements | Service Time | Service Location | Interment |
|-------------------------------------|-----|-------------|--------|--------------|--------------|------------------|-----------|
| *Schilffarth, Ronald “Jeff” Jeffery | 59 | - | - | Highlands | - | - | - |

*Additional information in display obituaries
Obituaries appear in print and online at courier-journal.com/obituaries

Ronald “Jeff” Jeffery Schilffarth

Ronald Jeffery “Jeff” Schilffarth, 59, passed away peacefully on September 8, 2025, in Miramar Beach, FL.

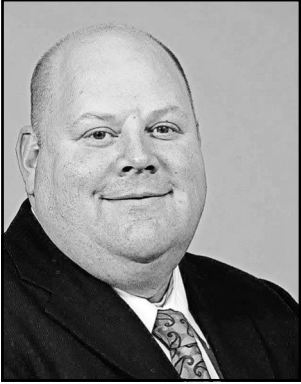
Born April 30, 1966, in Florence, KY, Jeff lived a life filled with love, laughter, and purpose. For 36 years, he was the devoted husband of Connie Schilffarth and the proud father of Ashley and Trey Schilffarth.

He was preceded in death by his mother and stepfather, Gloria and Ted Bushelman, his in-laws Alton John “Kayo” and Betty Schneider, and his stepbrother TJ Bushelman. Survivors include his father and stepmother, Ron and Suzanne Schilffarth, brothers Steve Schilffarth and Chris Bushelman, and stepsister Kimberly Bushelman.

Jeff worked in telecommunications and sales for over 30 years. He served on the board of Kosair for Kids, was a Shriner, a member of the Freemasons and the Royal Order of Jesters, and played football at the University of Kentucky. Known for his warm smile and welcoming spirit, Jeff will be remembered for his humor, kindness, and love of family.

Visitation will be held at Highlands Funeral Home on Wednesday, September 24 from 3 - 8 p.m., with the funeral service on Thursday, September 25, at 10 a.m. In lieu of flowers, donations may be made to Kosair for Kids.

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