

## New technology connects women substance abusers to support and services **HOW A SPECIALIZED APP IS HELPING KEEP WOMEN OUT OF PRISON**

At the doorstep of a lengthy prison sentence, Jill Oomen thought she could beat the rap on drug distribution, possession and forgery charges to go on living her life using methamphetamine.

Oomen's public defender balked at his 33-year-old client. She had been in and out of incarceration since she was 18. He pushed for Oomen to enter Women in Recovery, a comprehensive and intensive 18-month rehabilitation program for female substance abusers.

Now 36, Oomen is living clean as a cosmetologist a year after her graduation from the program. She carries a tool in her pocket featuring an array of help at her fingertips 24/7 — a smartphone app that represents the latest in continuing-care

"You're in this bubble — the Women in Recovery bubble. Now all of a sudden you're back in the real world and don't have all those things hanging over your head," Oomen said of the structured nature of the recovery program. "And even though you're not there, you have that access (with the app) all the time."

The app is called A-CHESS, which stands for Addiction Comprehensive Health Enhancement Support System. The system was developed through scientific research by Dr. David H. Gustafson, a nationally recognized addiction treatment expert.

A-CHESS began as a Women in Recovery pilot project in March 2016 through a grant from the Oklahoma Department of Mental Health and Substance Abuse Services. Clients received the app two months later. Now, 164 women have it.

### High-risk alarm, surveys

Ashley Knapp, a continuing-care case manager, emphasized that Women in Recovery is special in the way the program retains routine contact with those who finish rehabilitation.

The app is a specialized platform to address a variety of those continuing recovery needs.

For example, it features a high-risk location alarm function that goes off if a person gets too close to a casino or drug house they used to frequent. The app automatically will open the woman's designated motivation, such as a prerecorded video of her kids saying, "I love you" or a photo of her pets or garden she takes pride in.

"I will be assisting a client with uploading this app to their phone, and I'll go into explaining what it's like and we'll pick their high-risk locations," Knapp said. "And then we'll talk about what will happen — like that

video of your children coming up — and I will see women tearing up, actually feeling really emotional about how excited they are and how well-supported they feel with this."

Oomen removed the app from her phone for a brief period but now says she intends to keep it for life. She finds value in how it prompts her to do a self inventory and re-evaluate areas of her life if necessary.

A daily yes-or-no question asks Oomen each morning: "Are you confident you can make it through the day?"

A weekly survey asks her to rate her sleep patterns, family and friend relationships, her urges to drink or use drugs, level of anxiety or depression and other indicators of stressors that could compound and trigger a relapse.



services offered by Women in Recovery, a Tulsa-based arm of Family & Children's Services.

Users can connect with other graduates, pull up motivational reminders, find support groups, listen to inspirational talks, self-evaluate through regular surveys, or obtain immediate help. Women in Recovery staff tout its benefits as a safety net and a way to create "touch points" with graduates to keep them engaged in their recoveries.



If someone responds to the daily question that she isn't confident of making it through the day, Women in Recovery staff are alerted and will reach out right then. If a certain threshold is reached or responses are outside the norm in the weekly sliding scale queries, staff also will quickly make contact to see what's going on and how they can help.

"It's really easy to just get caught up in everyday life," Oomen said. "You go through the emotions, you go to work, you do this, you do that, but sometimes we forget to stop

and just kind of check in with ourselves and make sure that we're still on the right track.”

A “beacon button” is available for women in a crisis, immediately eliciting a phone call from Women in Recovery during business hours or the COPES emergency crisis line after hours.

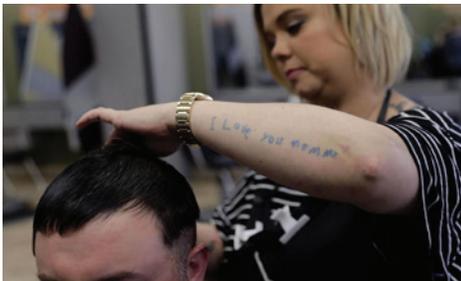
Other times, a woman simply wants a sounding board when, for example, a child runs away and they've already notified police and must anxiously wait.

“All they really need is a calming presence,” Knapp said.

The platform also allows staff to proactively schedule therapy sessions or put out notifications about group events or free tickets.

“I'm sure a lot of them are tired of getting voicemails from me,” Knapp quipped. “Giving them a call, ‘Hey, I see on my calendar that it's your kiddo's ninth birthday. If you want to, come in and get a birthday bag and let's get him a cake. And how are you? Do you need a bag of groceries today? How's employment going? Oh, you've got a new job, congratulations.’”

“We're always trying to make sure that they're getting resources that they need, but even more than that having a sense of community here is really important. We want them to have this amazing life and success and stability.”



### Comfort, immediacy

Mimi Tarrasch, executive senior program director, said Women in Recovery received all 150 A-CHESS lifetime licenses available for Oklahoma as part of the pilot project.

Staff were so enamored with the app and its quantifiable success that they wrote a follow-up grant, which was OK'd by Family & Children's Services to outfit another

group of women graduates. Tarrasch said Chess Health, the technology developer, is giving Women in Recovery a rate of \$96 per lifetime license.

“There's a sense of comfort and a sense of immediacy (with the app),” Tarrasch said. “And it's reconnecting them with people they know so that trust is there and confidence is there and confidentiality is there.”

Tarrasch said they intend to continue applying for grants in an effort to give each graduate lifetime access to the app.

The app also allows Women in Recovery to track statistics to gauge success and how better to serve clients.

According to Women in Recovery's latest statistics, 79 percent of graduates maintain contact with staff or attend continuing-care events for at least one year after completing the program.

### Additionally:

- **73 percent are employed for at least six months after graduation.**
- **99 percent avoid new felony charges for one year after graduation.**
- **91 percent who relapsed within a year of graduation and received Women in Recovery treatment services have avoided incarceration.**

Women in Recovery isn't just for those who have been in prison. About three-fourths of the participants haven't been to prison.

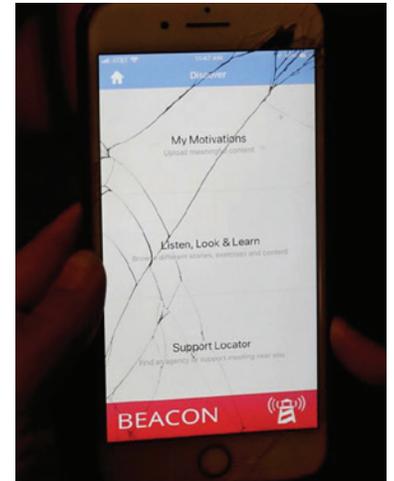
But the recovery program keys in on the risky behavior of substance abuse that is more likely to land a woman in prison. Oklahoma is No. 1 in the nation for female incarceration rate, at more than double the national average, according to U.S. Bureau of Justice statistics.

Women in Recovery was established in 2009 as a means to drive down Tulsa County's contribution of women to the state's prison system.

In Fiscal Year 2010, Oklahoma County and Tulsa County respectively contributed 326 and 313 women (about 22 percent each) to the almost 1,400 women placed into state prisons, according to statistics provided by Women in Recovery.

Tulsa County was down substantially, to 123 women out of 1,600 overall (about 8 percent) in FY 2017. Meanwhile, Oklahoma County had risen to 370 women (about 23 percent).

“I think what we do by far is better for public safety,” Tarrasch said, noting that Women in Recovery has instilled recovery tools in 380 women rather than simply



jettisoning them back into society without coping mechanisms.

### 'Constant reminder'

Oomen can't find enough positive words about Women in Recovery, saying she's “blown away” by its after-care work.

She reflects back on her meth use since the age of 15 and believes she likely would have ended up dead or saddled with a lifetime prison sentence without appropriate intervention.

Oomen has never needed the A-CHESS app's “beacon button” or relapsed, she said.

But she uses the group chat functions and has reached out to other graduates who posted about a rough patch and needed support.

Oomen remains plugged in by attending weekly group therapy sessions and monthly alumni events and by participating in a mentor program.

“I think it's nice to have a constant reminder every day that I am in recovery,” Oomen said in reference to the app. “And even though life may be good and I get up and go to work, I am in recovery.”

“And I have to remember that every day.”