

PROGRAM PROFILE

Women in Recovery, Oklahoma

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Women in Recovery is a program operated by a behavioral health agency, Family and Children’s Services, that serves women with substance use disorder (SUD) facing long jail or prison sentences for nonviolent, drug-related offenses. This profile discusses Women in Recovery’s approach to integrating employment services into its treatment and recovery programs, along with lessons and insights shared by program staff members.

This profile was developed as part of a descriptive study of programs that offer employment services to people with SUD; the study was part of the Building Evidence on Employment Strategies (BEES) Project, funded by the Office of Planning, Research, and Evaluation in the Administration for Children and Families, within the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. The profile draws on video and phone interviews with program administrators and staff members conducted during the summer of 2020. For quick facts on Women in Recovery, see Box 1.¹

PROGRAM OVERVIEW

Women in Recovery is structured in three phases that gradually move from intensive support to employment and independent living:

- **Phase 1:** Participants live in housing provided by Women in Recovery and engage in a range of program activities for a minimum of five days a week for four months. Activities include job-readiness classes, daily therapy sessions, twice-weekly Narcotics Anonymous and Alcoholics Anonymous meetings, occupational skills training in culinary arts, and one-on-one meetings with staff members. In those one-on-one meetings participants explore their employment goals, learn soft skills such as time management and budgeting, coordinate child visitation, and manage their public benefits.

- **Phase 2:** Participants continue the services detailed above, and at this point can also begin working up to 20 hours a week. For those who are working, participation in program activities is required only three days per week.
- **Phase 3:** In this phase, participants can work full time. Participation in recovery meetings is still required, but some participants begin to live on their own. Women in Recovery staff members provide more limited one-on-one services as participants transition to living independently, although participants continue to be supervised by court services or probation officers.

Throughout participants’ tenure in the program, SUD treatment teams—which include case managers, employment staff members, and therapists—meet twice a month to coordinate and share information about participants’ progress and treatment needs.



LOCAL CONTEXT AND PARTICIPANTS

Women in Recovery serves participants in Tulsa, Oklahoma and surrounding areas. Oklahoma has one of the highest rates of female incarceration in the country. As is the case in Oklahoma generally, methamphetamine is the most widely used substance among the women at Women in Recovery, followed by alcohol.

According to Women in Recovery, a vast majority of participants have incomes at or below the poverty level, and are affected by a history of abuse and poverty in addition to substance use. Staff members report that about two-thirds of participants are unemployed when they start the program and the rest have some type of part-time job, though most who have been employed have unstable employment histories. Nearly half of participants enter the program without a high school diploma or equivalent. About 80 percent are mothers, some with custody of their children and some without.

Box 1. Women in Recovery: Quick Facts

PROGRAM:	Women in Recovery
LOCATION:	Tulsa, OK
IMPLEMENTING ORGANIZATION:	Family and Children's Services
PARTICIPANTS SERVED PER YEAR:	250
SERVICES:	Residential, supervised program as an alternative to incarceration, SUD treatment and recovery services, employment services (including occupational skills training), and support services to facilitate the transition to living and working independently
STAFFING:	32 full-time equivalent staff members

Women in Recovery receives referrals from the criminal legal system and other public agencies, and also has a staff member who visits local jails regularly both to recruit participants and to meet with women who have expressed interest in Women in Recovery after hearing about it through advertisements or word of mouth.



SUD TREATMENT AND RECOVERY SERVICES

Women in Recovery offers the following treatment and recovery services:

- **Individual and group therapy.** Participants are required to attend daily individual and group therapy sessions in the first phase of the program, and then attend three times a week in the second phase. Individual therapy sessions use a range of therapeutic models (depending on the participant and her specific issues). All participants in the program have access to the lead organization's clinic for psychiatric medications as well.
- **Peer support meetings.** Participants are required to attend group peer support meetings, either Alcoholics Anonymous or Narcotics Anonymous, on-site at Women in Recovery. How of-

ten they are required to attend depends on how long they have been in the program.

- **Medication for opioid use disorder (MOUD).** The psychiatric clinic on site administers MOUD to participants. Women in Recovery case managers help set up appointments, and make sure that participants are getting their medication and staying on it.



EMPLOYMENT SERVICES

Employment is a requirement for graduation from the program, and as participants progress through the three phases of the program as described above, the focus shifts from treatment, recovery, and training in basic skills, to balancing family and work. Women in Recovery offers the following employment services:

- **Job-readiness classes.** All program participants are required to take job-readiness classes. These classes cover talking to employers about gaps in employment and criminal records, creating a résumé, interviewing, asking for a raise, and advancing in a career.

- **Occupational training.** All women at Women in Recovery participate in a two-part course in culinary skills that begins in the first phase of the program. Through this training, participants receive food safety permits from the city health department, which are required for employment in local restaurants and kitchen settings. The training is offered on-site at Women in Recovery, led by a chef in a teaching kitchen with restaurant-grade equipment. The beginning culinary class covers dishwashing, food prep, equipment safety, and customer service. The advanced class teaches meal prep for a large number of people, proper knife techniques, how to read a recipe, and portion control. As part of their training, participants prepare lunches for Women in Recovery’s cafeteria and cater events for the community.
- **Educational programs.** Participants work to obtain their high school diplomas or equivalents (if they do not already have them) by the time they graduate from the program, and can take high school equivalency exam classes taught by volunteers. For those who already have their high school diplomas or equivalents, Women in Recovery has a partnership with the local community college under which the college waives fees for participants working toward associate’s degrees.
- **Job placement and retention.** To help participants find potential job matches, Women in Recovery maintains a database of occupations of interest to participants, wages, and job requirements. Most participants find work in the restaurant and manufacturing industries.



SUPPORT SERVICES

Women in Recovery offers a range of support services to participants, during and after program participation. While participants are enrolled, case managers help participants acquire public benefits and understand how working affects those benefits, and also provide assistance with obtaining housing, receiving transit subsidies, opening a bank account, creating a budget, and developing a childcare plan to enable employment. Women in Recovery also helps participants get professional clothing through local nonprofit organizations and thrift stores. The program offers legal services support for issues such as child support and custody, driver’s licenses, divorce, eviction, and fines and fees. Finally, Women in Recovery works with volunteers to provide social activities such as Zumba, yoga, and a book club.

Women in Recovery also provides services to women after they complete the program. The program assigns soon-to-be graduates to a continuing-care therapist, who teaches a “shame-resilience” class emphasizing that there is no shame in reaching out for help once women leave the program. The program also provides regular social activities for graduates, and a mentor program in which Women in Recovery alumnae are paired with new graduates for support. In addition, past participants have access to an app that warns them if they are nearing a hotspot/triggering environment. The app includes daily surveys to see if women are sleeping enough and attending meetings, and to see how they are doing generally. The app can also be used to reach out to the Women in Recovery staff.

PARTNERS

As discussed, Women in Recovery works closely with several employer partners to promote dialogue between employers and employees about being in an intensive substance use treatment program. Women in Recovery also has a partnership with the local community college under which the college waives fees for participants working toward associate’s degrees.

FUNDING SOURCES

Women in Recovery is mainly funded by private charitable foundations, which staff members report offers more flexibility than public funding. Some of Women in Recovery’s foundation funding uses a pay-for-success approach, in which Women in Recovery receives up-front funding for service delivery, and then additional payments for each participant who achieves specific outcomes (graduation and staying out of jail at three specific follow-up points). Women in Recovery can also receive public benefits funding for women who qualify for certain programs. For example, Women in Recovery can bill Medicaid for treatment and recovery services for women who are pregnant. For women eligible for Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program Employment and Training, Women in Recovery can receive a match of 50 percent of any expenses for employment or education classes—including the culinary program—and any related supplies or incentives.



STAFF REFLECTIONS

Women in Recovery staff members emphasized that a major challenge for participants is the long-standing nature of their traumas. Women come to the program needing to address not just substance use but the trauma behind it and the range of support needs introduced by their life histories. The program's approach to dealing with these challenges includes:

- **Early and intensive support.** Women in Recovery's residential setting, coupled with daily, trauma-informed therapy sessions and a rigorous schedule of case management and employment services, provides participants with a structured and supportive environment in which to begin their recovery process and work on underlying issues.
- **Emphasis on developing self-sufficiency.** Women in Recovery helps participants plan for self-sufficiency before they transition to living independently. Women can transition to part-time work while still in Women in Recovery housing and attending regular therapy and peer support meetings, and while they receive assistance with addressing legal issues, budgeting, childcare planning, and understanding benefit trade-offs.

- **Ongoing support.** Once participants graduate from the program, they maintain access and ties to Women in Recovery through a continuing-care therapist and through social activities. This continuing contact provides a long-term opportunity to maintain the skills developed in the program.




SNAPSHOT GRAPHIC

Figure 1 summarizes Women in Recovery's services.

NOTES AND REFERENCES

- 1 Box 1 gives staff sizes in full-time equivalents. Full-time equivalents indicate the number of full-time employees at an organization plus the number of part-time employees, standardized to a full-time basis. For example, an organization with 4 full-time and 3 half-time employees would have 5.5 full-time equivalents.

Figure 1. Snapshot of Services in Women in Recovery’s Treatment and Recovery Programs

	Activity	Description
TREATMENT AND RECOVERY SERVICES 	Medication for opioid use disorder	On-site dosing Support from a case manager with appointment scheduling and treatment adherence
	Individual and group therapy	Group therapy (daily at first, then three times per week) Individual therapy using a range of therapeutic models (daily at first, then three times per week)
	Peer support	Twice-weekly Alcoholics Anonymous and Narcotics Anonymous meetings
SUPPORTIVE SERVICES 	Within-program support	Benefits counseling and planning for self-sufficiency needs (childcare, budgeting, housing, transportation, professional attire) Legal services assistance Social activities such as Zumba, yoga, and a book club
	Ongoing support	Shame-resiliency class Access to a continuing-care therapist Ongoing social activities Mentoring program Trigger-warning app
EMPLOYMENT SERVICES 	Educational services	Required high school equivalency classes for those without a high school diploma or equivalent Partnership with a community college for those with a high school diploma or equivalent
	Training services	On-site culinary skills training leading to a certificate Work-based learning opportunities preparing cafeteria lunches and catering events
	Job-preparation services	Group classes on job-readiness topics
	Job search support	Assistance identifying desired jobs
	Job retention	Staff advocacy with employer partners to ensure they understand participants’ needs and schedules

SOURCE: Interviews with Women in Recovery leaders and staff members conducted between June and August of 2020.