

# Life under surveillance

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## Podcast Episode



A Rock County criminal offender offers a look at life on electronic monitoring. Kyle Geissler reports.

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## Photo



Photo by [Bill Olmsted](#)

Janesville resident Kerry Wehrwein wears two electronic monitoring bracelets. One checks her alcohol levels (bottom) and the other monitors her location.

JANESVILLE — Kerry Wehrwein looks like a teacher or a librarian, but appearances are deceiving.

Her bright red lipstick, dressy blouse and sparkling earrings contradict the ankle bracelets hidden beneath the cuffs of her black pants.

Family photos, snowmen decorations and angel figurines in the living room contrast the tracking devices on an end table that wirelessly tether her to her home.

"I have just had a drinking problem all my life," she said. "It just goes way back to my childhood."

Wehrwein is one of about 813 offenders who in 2008 participated in alternative programs to stay out of jail.

Of those, 124, about 15 percent, have been kicked out for reasons such as drinking alcohol, using drugs or committing new offenses.

The jail alternative programs include electronic monitoring to track offenders and Workenders to let offenders pay off their fines with labor.

It costs \$64 a day to house an inmate in jail after expenses such as staff wages and food, Sheriff's Sgt. Brent DeRemer said.

Alternative programs reduce the jail population and save money, he said.

They also allow offenders to remain home with their families, Sheriff's Lt. Russ Steeber said.

"A lot of these people make mistakes, and they make errors," Steeber said. "But that doesn't necessarily mean they're bad people."

Wehrwein, a 47-year-old Janesville waitress, has three drunken-driving convictions, including one involving a wreck. She joined the electronic monitoring program to remain home with her 16-year-old daughter.

If she wasn't on electronic monitoring, she probably would sleep every night in the Rock County Jail and be released each day—without monitoring—to go to work.

She wears two bracelets, one around each ankle. One bracelet detects alcohol in her body. The other uses GPS to track her movements.

Wehrwein speaks with a calm voice and is open about her struggles with alcohol, jail and life under surveillance.

### **Drunken driving**

Wehrwein's recent problems began in November 2006. It was late at night. She had been drinking beer at home and got drunk. She decided to visit a friend but drove through a red light on the way.

"I probably had over a 12 pack," she said.

She was convicted of her second drunken-driving charge. Her first was in 1989. Her license was suspended for a year, but she continued driving to work.

Three months later, Wehrwein again was drinking at home. She was cleaning. She wanted a few more beers. She headed to a Janesville bar and figures she had about 12 beers, "give or take."

"I went there and had a few and was leaving, and it was snowing," she said. "I pulled out, obviously I didn't look, and a car was coming."

Wehrwein was nailed in the driver's side of her Pontiac car. She needed eight stitches in her head and had a chipped tooth. The other vehicle, a Mercedes, had \$10,000 in damage.

"I had had enough that I didn't remember a whole lot," she said. "I didn't know until the next day that I got into an accident with people. I thought I had went straight into a snow bank."

She was hospitalized and later convicted of a third drunken-driving charge and several other tickets, including driving with a suspended license.

### **Time in jail**

Wehrwein applied to serve her jail sentence on electronic monitoring and was accepted. She served 48 hours in jail and then was strapped to ankle bracelets in December 2007.

In jail, she slept on the top bunk. It felt like camp. She got teased. Other inmates humiliated her.

Wehrwein became sick to her stomach. She was nervous. She shared a cellblock with five or six other inmates.

Wehrwein kept to herself. She slept. She hardly ate. It was cold. She wore long underwear to stay warm.

"It was scary," Wehrwein said. "Just doing that 48 hours was enough for me to appreciate the program.

"It was hard. Some of those people, they're in and out of there all the time," she said. "One girl was in there almost two years. I couldn't even imagine."

Two days later, she was fitted for the electronic monitoring equipment. She then returned home to her daughter.

"I don't know what I would do without the program," Wehrwein said. "I can't imagine what it would be like to be in jail and have my daughter's life interrupted more than it already has been."

### **A second chance**

While on electronic monitoring, Wehrwein continued to drive to work, even though her license was suspended.

The GPS tracking bracelet didn't sound an alarm because even though she was driving illegally, she stayed within her designated home-to-work route.

She got pulled over five months later in May and was ticketed for speeding and driving after revocation. She later missed her court appearance. Two warrants for her arrest were issued.

On Halloween, Wehrwein was arrested and spent six days in jail. Her daughter stayed with a friend's family.

"It was more than a nightmare than I could even imagine," she said.

The sheriff's office gave her a second chance to go on electronic monitoring. She was released from jail.

She's been on her second stint on electronic monitoring since November.

### **Life under surveillance**

Wehrwein hides the ankle bracelets under long pants.

"I'm embarrassed. A lot of times when I think about my alcohol problem, it makes me feel not normal," she said. "If I stretch or something, I hope the bracelets don't ever show."

The alcohol bracelet will alert the sheriff's office if she drinks booze. She stays away from certain cleaning or beauty products to ensure alcohol doesn't absorb into her skin.

The GPS bracelet keeps her from going anywhere other than work or home. She gets two hours a week to run errands.

Wehrwein can't go to a movie, restaurant or walk the dogs. She has missed her daughter's choir concerts and cheerleading events.

"It's hard on her and on me not to be able to be there and support her," Wehrwein said.

She and her daughter aren't allowed to have visitors.

Wehrwein gets checked regularly. A deputy stops by and gives her breath tests. The deputy also makes sure her bracelets are on.

The bracelets won't be removed until her sentence is complete. They're on in bed and in the shower. They're light and about the size of a cassette tape.

### **Staying sober**

Living on electronic monitoring is tough, but it's better than jail, Wehrwein said.

"I don't want to do anything I'm not supposed to so I don't end up back in jail," Wehrwein said. "I would much rather follow the rules and live under my roof than theirs."

She will remain on electronic monitoring until March 18 if she behaves. She still has to be sentenced on two driving after revocation charges. The judge could order her to spend additional time on the bracelets.

"If I'm on it longer, I don't have any objection," she said. "It's better than the alternative."

Wehrwein knows she caught a break by not sitting in jail. She's been sober since October and hopes to remain alcohol free. She wants to get involved in a church.

"It's sad how alcohol can take over your life and ruin everything for you," she said. "I wish I would have done something about it long ago, but I guess I wasn't strong enough."

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### **Electronic monitoring**

Offenders who meet certain requirements can serve their jail sentence in the community if they go on electronic monitoring.

Offenders can wear two different ankle bracelets:

-- One bracelet is equipped with GPS and tracks the offender's every move, Rock County Sheriff's Sgt. Brent DeRemer said.

-- The second detects whether the offender drinks alcohol.

Some offenders wear both.

Placing offenders on electronic monitoring reduces the jail population and saves money, DeRemer said.

The program also allows offenders to pay their debts to society while remaining with their families, Sheriff's Lt. Russ Steeber said.

The person wearing the bracelet submits a schedule they must follow, DeRemer said. The bracelets alert the sheriff's office if the schedule is broken.

Exclusionary zones can be entered to keep offenders away from a victim or bar, he said. If the person enters the zone, the sheriff's office is alerted and can call or send a deputy.

Offenders who violate the program's rules are jailed.

The sheriff's office carefully reviews who can be on electronic monitoring to ensure the community is safe, DeRemer said.

Offenders with felony drug, sex or child abuse charges are not allowed on electronic monitoring, he said. Criminal history also is researched to ensure the offender isn't a risk.

Electronic monitoring started in 1998.

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Admissions: 565

Releases: 491

Returned to jail: 59

Escaped: 2

Money saved by keeping offenders out of jail: \$1.7 million

### **Reasons 59 people were removed from electronic monitoring in 2008**

Drug use: 16

Alcohol use: 24

No home: 4

Went to banned area: 7

Lost phone service: 2

Committed new offenses: 3

Criminal history discovered: 3

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