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Sherman L. Harris holds a Secure Continuous Remote Alcohol Monitor, or SCRAM, bracelet. Harris once wore the device, which detects alcohol consumption.

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Bracelets keep tabs on alcohol intake

East Texas offenders could see more orders to wear them

By PEGGY O'HARE

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Sherman L. Harris knows alcohol has caused problems in his life. After struggling with the bottle for five years, he was arrested for assaulting his estranged wife, and his 28-year marriage ended.

But the Houston man turned a corner earlier this year when a state district judge ordered him to wear a bracelet to ensure he did not drink. Today, he is sober and thankful for the technology's impact on his life.

Known as the Secure Continuous Remote Alcohol Monitor — or, more commonly, a SCRAM bracelet — the device is strapped to an offender's ankle 24 hours a day, seven days a week, to monitor whether the person has consumed any alcohol.

Harris, 53, wore the bracelet for two months before the court agreed to its removal in September.

"It really helped change my life and helped me realize I needed to do something different," said Harris, who is now on probation, having received deferred adjudication after pleading no contest to a charge of aggravated assault. "All in all, it actually made me think, and it kept me straight — because I knew what the consequences were going to be if I did not stay straight."

Harris is one of 59 people in the Houston area and East Texas who have worn the bracelets in the past year while awaiting trial or serving probation for alcohol-related offenses.

RESOURCES

SENSOR

Secure Continuous Remote Alcohol Monitor, or SCRAM, bracelets are designed to detect alcohol consumption. How they work:

- **The bracelet** uses trans-dermal analysis to check for chemicals secreted through the skin.
- **The readings** are then relayed through a telephone modem to a computer system in Colorado maintained by Alcohol Monitoring Systems.

The technology still is relatively new here. The company contracted to distribute the bracelets opened an office in Houston last year.

But the remote sensor has been used far more liberally in the Dallas Metroplex, where more than 300 offenders are now wearing the device and 1,100 others have worn it in the past.

Tests perspiration

A local distributor believes Houston eventually may embrace the SCRAM bracelets to an even greater degree.

"I think the drinking issues in the Harris County area could support hundreds of defendants being on SCRAM. ... We could probably surpass Dallas," said Clarence Douglas, a retired Houston Police Department homicide sergeant now distributing SCRAM bracelets locally for Recovery Healthcare Corp.

The bracelets also are being used in Fort Bend, Brazoria and Galveston counties, as well as in the East Texas counties of Angelina and Hardin, Douglas said.

The bracelet looks like a pair of stereo headphones strapped around someone's ankle. But the 8-ounce tool is really a sophisticated, Internet-based measuring device that tests an offender's perspiration once an hour for alcohol consumption.

Because alcohol metabolizes in a person's body so quickly, the SCRAM bracelet uses a form of testing known as transdermal analysis to check for chemicals secreted through the skin. The readings are then relayed through a telephone modem to a computer system in Colorado maintained by Alcohol Monitoring Systems, the company that manufactures the bracelets.

Once the bracelet is strapped on, an offender cannot take it off. It is water-resistant, so the offender does not have to remove the bracelet to shower. However, it cannot be submerged in water, such as bathtubs or hot tubs.

Alcohol consumption or attempts to obstruct the device's measuring capabilities are immediately reported via computer, and local authorities are notified.

"This is not based upon a new scientific foundation — this is based upon over 70 years of scientific research," said Lisa Fellows, vice president of customer services for Alcohol Monitoring Systems.

The readings offer a round-the-clock glimpse into the offender's life.

"We can tell when they're asleep. We can tell when they get up. A lot of times, we can tell when they've showered. And that's because of the variations in the temperature," Fellows told local probation officials and attorneys at a conference promoting the tool in Houston earlier this year.

Distort readings

Besides measuring ethanol vapor and temperature, the bracelet also contains an infrared distance detector that can tell if an offender has tampered with the device, such as trying to shove an obstruction between his ankle and the bracelet.

"We've had people use bologna because they think it's like skin. ... All kinds of paper and things to try and disguise it," Douglas said.

Scott Ramsey, one of the Houston attorneys attending the conference promoting the tool, said he is concerned about possible false readings, although the company that distributes the SCRAM

insists it is accurate.

Ramsey, who cautioned that he has no experience with SCRAM because none of his clients have used it, also expressed a concern about the steep cost of the technology and whether it could hurt a defendant's chance of being granted bail while awaiting trial.

That's because offenders pay all the costs of SCRAM. In Harris County, the installation fee is \$60, and monitoring fees average \$12 to \$14 a day.

"My concern is once the judges are aware this is available, they might decide to impose this as a condition of bond, just kind of across the board," Ramsey said. "I think for many people it would be cost prohibitive."

The bracelet also can be an uncomfortable inconvenience, although offenders who wear it usually adjust quickly.

"When you lay down and sleep and turn your leg one way or another, you may lose a couple hours of sleep a night in the beginning," Harris said. "You learn what positions to get into that will be comfortable. What I did was I started putting a pillow under my foot."

'One tool'

So far, eight state district judges and two county court judges in Harris County have ordered offenders to wear the bracelets, Douglas said.

State District Judge Caprice Cosper said that although she cannot endorse any specific product, SCRAM's technology provides a more sophisticated method of accountability for alcohol offenders. She estimates she has ordered eight to 10 offenders to wear the device in recent months. In one case, she reduced a man's bail on the condition that he wear the bracelet while he was free from custody.

"The SCRAM device is one tool in a much bigger arsenal, which includes supervision, treatment and accountability," the judge said.

Cosper, too, expressed concern about the cost, which she hopes will decrease as the bracelet becomes more widely used.

"It is new, and it is expensive," she said.

Harris said he would recommend the device for other probationers who have struggled with alcohol. He hasn't been tempted to drink since he stopped wearing the bracelet in September.

"I can truly say today I haven't had a drink or anything like that," Harris said, "and I have no desire to."

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