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Researchers Forming Alliance to Help Women Who Have Been Incarcerated

LITTLE ROCK — A research team at the University of Arkansas for Medical Sciences (UAMS) recently received an award from the Patient-Centered Outcomes Research Institute (PCORI) to help launch an alliance of Arkansas organizations that provide services to women who have been incarcerated.

According to research, justice-involved women commonly suffer from chronic physical and mental health conditions that are exacerbated by incarceration and often go unaddressed after they are released. Yet, there is little research on best practices to meet their needs, even though the number of incarcerated women in the U.S. has grown over 700% in the past several decades.

The two-year, \$250,000 funding award through the [Eugene Washington PCORI Engagement Award program](#) was given to Melissa Zielinski, Ph.D., director of UAMS' Health and the Legal System (HEALS) Lab, who, along with a team that includes Katy Allison, Ph.D., of UAMS and April Bachrodt, Ph.D., of Magdalene Serenity House, will use the funds to build the Women's Justice-Health Alliance (WJHA).

Members of the WJHA will build capacity to do research on justice-involved women's health together and will develop research priorities that will drive applications for research funding in the future. The team's efforts will be overseen by a community advisory board of eight women who have been incarcerated.

Women released from prisons and jails face many barriers when trying to access quality health care, according to Zielinski, including cost and lack of insurance and transportation to an unfamiliarity with the resources available to them. Finding services in more rural areas is also a challenge. But, Zielinski says, the question is "where to start?"

“We’re going to spend the next two years doing a lot of preparatory work to learn what the priorities of this community are and how we can come together to do research to learn how to best achieve them,” said Zielinski.

Potential partners in the alliance will include academic and professional organizations, advocacy groups, community nonprofits, health-service providers, religious ministries and state agencies. Zielinski and her team already have one partner in the alliance, Magdalene Serenity House, a residential recovery program in Fayetteville, which is co-leading the project.

The team plans to focus on recruiting many more partners to the alliance by the end of July. “Then we’ll get together and talk about what we want to do,” Zielinski said.

One of the priorities of the project will be conducting interviews with the organizations and the women they serve, she added. “We’ll come up with a research agenda based on those interviews.”

PCORI is a Washington, D.C.-based independent nonprofit authorized by Congress to fund comparative clinical effectiveness (CER) research that will provide patients, their caregivers and clinicians with the evidence-based information needed to make better-informed health care decisions. The “Arkansas Building Capacity for Women’s Justice-Health PCOR/CER” award (#26289) is part of a portfolio of projects that PCORI has funded to help develop a community of patients and other stakeholders equipped to participate as partners in CER and disseminate PCORI-funded study results. Through the Engagement Award Program, PCORI is creating an expansive network of individuals, communities and organizations interested in and able to participate in, share, and use patient-centered CER.

UAMS is the state's only health sciences university, with colleges of Medicine, Nursing, Pharmacy, Health Professions and Public Health; a graduate school; a hospital; a main campus in Little Rock; a Northwest Arkansas regional campus in Fayetteville; a statewide network of regional campuses; and seven institutes: the Winthrop P. Rockefeller Cancer Institute, Jackson T. Stephens Spine & Neurosciences Institute, Harvey & Bernice Jones Eye Institute, Psychiatric Research Institute, Donald W. Reynolds Institute on Aging, Translational Research Institute and Institute for Digital Health & Innovation. UAMS includes UAMS Health, a statewide health system that encompasses all of UAMS' clinical enterprise. UAMS is the only adult Level 1 trauma center in the state. UAMS has 3,240 students, 913 medical residents and fellows, and five dental residents. It is the state's largest public employer with more than 11,000 employees, including 1,200 physicians who provide care to patients at UAMS, its regional campuses, Arkansas Children's, the VA Medical Center and Baptist Health. Visit www.uams.edu or www.uamshealth.com. Find us on [Facebook](#), [Twitter](#), [YouTube](#) or [Instagram](#).

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