Interlock system offers judges weapon to fight drunken drivers

BY KEITH LAWRENCE
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Sophisticated technology is now a part of the ongoing war to curb drunk driving, and one of the newest weapons being deployed is the ignition interlock system. A device, which checks a DWI offender's sobriety before his car will start.

Currently, judges in five states - California, Ohio, Michigan, Maryland and Colorado - are requiring some clinic offenders to install interlock systems in their cars.

There are no immediate plans in Louisiana to enact legislation that would allow judges to require the interlock system as a condition of sentencing, but some local officials say the device would help in the battle against drunk drivers.

Since April 1986, when the interlock system went on the market, judges have ordered about 200 people to install the device in their cars, said Karen Pearson, a spokeswoman for Guardian Interlock Systems Inc., a Denver-based company that produces the device.

Pearson admits the system is not foolproof, but she said that none of the offenders who have had the system installed have later been picked up for drunken driving.

"We're offering judges another tool for their arsenal," Pearson said.

The interlock system, which looks a little like a citizen's band radio, hooks into a car's ignition system. A driver must blow into a mouthpiece before the car will start.

When the breath test shows the driver's blood-alcohol content meets or exceeds the calibrated setting, the car will not start.

B.J. Daily, director of the mayor's office DWI project, has seen the interlock system tested at two different conferences, and he thinks it is a useful deterrent.

Before, when a judge placed a person convicted of DWI on probation, the judge had no guarantee the person would become a sober driver, Daily said.

Now, if a driver has an interlock system in his car, "the judge can sleep better," Daily said.

The interlock system has several safeguards to prevent driving while intoxicated. The safeguards include:

- Requiring the driver to blow a coordinated sequence of breaths into the interlock before the car will start.

The system has been found to be more effective than community service in rehabilitating drunk drivers.

When city prosecutor Ralph Tyson read about the interlock system, he said he "wasn't aware that technology had gone that far!"

Tyson said he believes the device might be effective when sentencing multiple offenders or first offenders who have been caught with a high blood-alcohol level.

Tyson said he will have his doubts until he sees the system in action, but he added, "I think the idea is fantastic. I will bring it up to city court judges to see what they think about it."

Three district court judges who handle DWI cases in East Baton Rouge Parish declined to comment on the system because they said they may be asked to rule on it some day.

Trooper D.R. Rando, who is involved in alcohol and chemical testing for the Louisiana State Police, said he approves of the idea, but believes it is not a cure-all to the DWI problem.

"The idea behind it is terrific. Anything we can do to keep the drunk driver, especially the multiple offender, off the road is worthwhile."

But Rando believes that some people convicted of DWI should not, under any circumstances, be permitted to drive.

"The problem is the man is an alcoholic," Rando said. "That's what needs to be addressed. All we're doing is applying a Band-Aid approach to the problem and not getting to the root of the problem."

Daily agrees.

He believes that second offenders need to go through a mandatory treatment program, not be offered a second chance to perform community service or have the interlock system installed.

"True social drinkers exit out the first time they get fingerprinted and muggshoted," Daily said. "Second offenders need . . . intense education, reality therapy relating to their drinking."

Still, the interlock system can serve a purpose because "the point of where the crime begins is in the car," Daily said.

Currently, Guardian Interlock is marketing its product through the courts.

Pearson said the company isn't considering expanding to Louisiana anytime soon because the state hasn't shown a lot of interest so far. The company has plans to market its product to the public, and state police spokesman Mike Edmonson said it might make an appropriate gift for someone who has a drinking problem.