New Drunk Driving Laws Cause Problems

By the Associated Press

Louisiana's new drunk driving laws are causing problems in Shreveport, but in Caldwell Parish the jail alternative program allowed under the laws are working fairly, officials say.

So many drunk drivers have elected public service instead of jail in Shreveport that the city can't supervise all the workers. Judges are cutting sentences for first offenders in half to ease the crowd on the trash pickup details.

The state's new, tougher driving while intoxicated — DWI — law went into effect the first of this year, those convicted of drunk driving for the first time are fined and given the choice of going to jail or doing public service work, usually in the form of picking up trash.

Now, judges at Shreveport are sentencing them to four days of public service work.

Police began more aggressive DWI enforcement, and the result was more defendants.

It has reached a point, Shreveport City Judge Bill Kelly says, where there are so many more people assigned to do public service work than city crews can handle.

"Neither the jail nor the Department of Public Works [which supervises the trash pickup detail] was able to cope with all the people," Kelly said.

City judges last month decided to begin sentencing DWI offenders to do four 8-hour days of public service work.

Kelly says it is an effort to make the program manageable and maintain its credibility by seeing that workers complete it.

Kelly said public works employees can properly supervise a maximum of 130 people picking up trash in areas of the city.

There were 220 people in the community service program at one point, he said.

"We didn't want the program to fail," Kelly added. "We didn't want it to become a joke; the public wants people held accountable for drunk driving.

In Shreveport, arrests for DWI last year were up 38 percent this year, as compared to last year. There have been 640 DWI citations issued this year, and less than 1 percent of the DWI defendants opt for two days in jail rather than four days of public service work, Kelly said.

Kelly said city judges also are attempting to make better use of the talents of people who are convicted of DWI. Those who have skills — such as mechanical, see that they could do public service work in their areas of expertise rather than pick up trash.

"You can't accomplish anything by putting people in jail," he said.

In Caldwell Parish, drunken drivers get a choice in District Court: two days in jail or four days at work. But they don't get to choose their job. It could be cleaning ditches on a street or scrubbing floors in a public building.

Whatever they do, the community service work program is working, say Caldwell Parish officials who created it in January under the new DWI law.

Some parishes, such as Ouachita, only use the jail sentence.

Caldwell District Judge Ronald Lewellyan and District Attorney Don Burns say they tried the work program in January as an experiment and so far are pleased with it.

Lewellyan says many — though not all — drunken drivers prefer the work to the jail time.

"At first, I assumed no one wanted to go to jail, so I just gave them the four work days," he said. But some people preferred to take the mandatory two days of jail and get it over with.

No matter what they choose, anyone convicted of DWI who accepts probation must attend mandatory sessions on driver education and alcohol abuse. Anyone who doesn't accept probation gets the regular DWI, first offense, sentence of six months in jail which Lewellyan imposes. (The minimum sentence, without probation, is 10 days.)

All DWI offenders also lose their drivers license.

The problem with imprisonment is that the jail is crowded and keeping someone confined costs money, Burns and Lewellyan explain.

Columbia Town Marshal Doug Crockett, who supervises DWI workers for his town, agrees that DWI workers do "some things that otherwise would not be done," saving public money.

"Every little town is in a bind, as far as finances, so every little bit of help they can get helps," he said.

So far, about a dozen DWI workers in Columbia have cooperated and performed their assigned duties, Crockett says.

"We've been real fortunate to have these people to help us."