



New move afoot to curb drunk drivers

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Many more people convicted of drunken driving would be forced to breathe into an in-car system that measures blood and won't allow vehicles to start if measurable alcohol is detected, under legislation making its way through Lansing.

A package of bills, with the strong backing of MADD Michigan, targets repeat offenders but also first-time violators whose blood-alcohol counts are 0.15% or more -- nearly twice the 0.08% limit at which a person can be convicted of drunken driving.

First-time offenders would face a mandatory 45 days without a license, alcohol assessment and appropriate treatment, and then the remainder of one year breathing into an ignition interlock that doesn't allow a vehicle to start if a driver blows into it and the device detects measurable alcohol.

Repeat offenders would be punished similarly but with progressively longer periods of mandatory use of ignition interlocks, until they face imprisonment for too many convictions. Offenders would face jail if they're caught circumventing the device or driving someone else's vehicle.

The provisions for first-time offenders could prompt more-heated debate. The measure is already raising opposition, but supporters say it takes heavy or extreme drinking for someone to reach 0.15%.

"It's not average behavior at all. It's extreme behavior," said MADD Michigan Executive Director Homer Smith, adding that people who reach that level account for nearly 60% of all alcohol-related crashes.

State Rep. Marc Corriveau, D-Northville, said studies show that "someone has gone way beyond social drinking into a dangerous area" if his or her blood-alcohol count is 0.15% or more.

The three-bill package passed the House Judiciary Committee last week, and Corriveau said he hopes to have a full House vote in the next couple of weeks. The other main sponsors are Reps. Daniel Acciavatti, R-Chesterfield Township, and Bob Constan, D-Dearborn Heights.

The action comes as the Michigan Office of Highway Safety Planning reports that the number of deaths from crashes involving alcohol rose to 383 in 2006 from 360 in 2005. The jump goes against the state's long-term decrease in alcohol-related traffic deaths. The number was 555 in 1996.

But it mirrors a national increase. Preliminary federal data show U.S. drunken-driving deaths increased to 17,941 in 2006 -- a level not seen since 1992, said Mothers Against Drunk Driving.

Statewide, 1,084 people died in car crashes in 2006, and 440 of those deaths -- about 40% -- were in crashes involving alcohol, drugs or a combination of them, highway safety spokeswoman Nikki Klemmer said.

The Michigan Licensed Beverage Association, which represents bars, restaurants and other purveyors of alcoholic beverages, opposes the interlock measure. It argues that the 0.15% threshold is too low to be considered extreme, takes discretion away from courts and that the cost of the penalties would create undue hardships for low-income people.

"Judges already have the ability to install these ignition interlocks," said Cathy Pavick, the group's executive director. "We believe for good public policy that these decisions should be left up to judges, so that they have the ability to look at each individual case and decide the best course of action."

Offenders would pay costs of the ignition interlock systems -- about \$2.50 a day -- and

court-ordered treatment. The interlocks would be monitored by private companies that would report regularly to the courts or the Michigan Department of State, said Gary Naeyaert, a spokesman for the Michigan Ignition Interlock Providers Association.

Michigan would be among a handful of states to make interlocks mandatory for first-time offenders. Supporters say New Mexico, for one, made interlocks mandatory in 2005 for all convicted drunken drivers and in the year afterward saw a reduction of about 20% in alcohol-related crashes.

MADD's national office in 2006 made as one of its top priorities passing the interlock requirement in all states for all drunken drivers.

View the text of House bills 4289, 4920 and 4921 at <http://legislature.mi.gov>. Contact **MATT HELMS** at driving@freepress.com or 313-222-1450.

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