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## Editorial

### No more driving drunk

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Relations between the governor and the General Assembly have been less than productive lately. Budget? Health care? Education? Transit? No deal, no deal, no deal, no deal.

With all of Springfield's recent failures, it's easy to forget one success. The legislature, led by Sen. John Cullerton (D-Chicago), became a leader again in the fight against drunken driving.

Years ago, under Gov. Jim Edgar, Illinois partnered with Mothers Against Drunk Driving to help change attitudes toward drinking and driving. The state lowered the legal blood-alcohol limit to .08. It also introduced the use of ignition interlock devices, which prevent a car from starting if the driver has been drinking. In a four-year pilot program, 1,451 drunken drivers used interlock devices and only 12 were subsequently charged and convicted of another drunken-driving offense. Edgar signed the program into law in 1998.

Since then, other states have taken more aggressive action. Faced with a stubborn drunken-driving problem, New Mexico passed the first law making interlock devices mandatory for all convicted DUI offenders. In its first year under the new law, New Mexico saw an 11.4 percent drop in alcohol-related fatalities.

Illinois still operates under a catch-and-release system in which first offenders have their licenses suspended. About 50 to 75 percent continue to drive anyway, according to MADD. Interlock devices allow offenders to drive legally as long as they are sober, but stop them when they attempt to drive while intoxicated. The driver has to breathe into the device, and the ignition won't start if alcohol is detected.

Current law only requires the devices for offenders who have two or more alcohol-related driving incidents within 10 years. This equates to fewer than 3,000 of the 50,000 people a year who are arrested on DUI offenses.

This spring, the legislature approved a bill to require interlock devices for all DUI offenders. The bill, which awaits Gov. Rod Blagojevich's signature, would issue all convicted drunken drivers, including first-time offenders, restricted licenses to drive only vehicles equipped with the devices. If offenders refused to install interlock devices, their licenses would be suspended and all driving privileges would be revoked.

Offenders who drive with a suspended license would face a tougher sentence. Driving with a suspended license would become a Class 4 felony, punishable with a mandatory 30-day jail sentence.

"Cullerton's bill is the best administrative interlock bill in the nation, a national model," said Chuck Hurley, executive director of MADD.

Hurley believes that as interlock technology improves it has the potential to wipe out drunken driving. He

expects to see interlocks as a standard safety feature on new cars in the next 10 to 15 years. (They can be calibrated to detect any level of alcohol.)

The governor of Louisiana signed a similar interlock bill July 17. It will take effect Aug. 15. By signing the Illinois bill, Blagojevich can take an important step toward ending the ineffective catch-and-release system for drunken drivers. And he can remind voters that he and the legislature can get things done when they work together.

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