

New system aims to decrease drunk driving

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Device 'locks up' when driver's alcohol level exceeds .03

Drunk driving, a problem that affects many people around the country, can now be corrected by simply exhaling.

Smart Start Inc., a Texas-based company, now offers a voluntary program through which an interlock, a device that checks breath alcohol content, is installed into a vehicle's ignition systems to prevent driving while intoxicated.

"The main goal is to separate drinking from driving," Debra Coffey, Smart Start's director of judicial services, said.

Smart Start began installing interlocks as mandated by courts in 1995 when Texas statute first required the monitoring system as a provision of probation and bond for some DWI offenders.

The device incapacitates a car's ignition system if it senses a breath alcohol content of .03 percent or more.

The legal limit for blood alcohol content while driving in Texas is .08 percent. Coffey said many customers still want an interlock even after their legal probationary period ends.

In response to this, the company created the Smart Start Volunteer Program, which has about 60 participants in Texas.

Smart Start uses a different product line at a lesser cost for the voluntary interlock.

This device costs \$25 per month with no installation fee. The units are installed by technicians certified by the Department of Public Safety and have anti-circumvention features to discourage bypass.

Coffey said the device is used as a safety net for poor judgment. This voluntary program is used by many people as an alternative to completely removing vehicle access.

Coffey said it is being employed by high school students, employers and elderly citizens.

Texas law mandates installation of the device as a condition of bond for a DWI offense and repeat or underage DWI convictions.

Myra Rodriguez of the Denton County adult community supervision and corrections department said that intoxication, assault or manslaughter also provide statute for interlock.

Rodriguez works with Smart Start daily to interpret reports that are kept as records for state-mandated interlock users by Smart Start. However, Smart Start does not receive funding from the state.

"We are happy to have it," Rodriguez said. "The state would do anything they can to keep DWI offenders from driving."

Denton County assistant district attorney Bill Schultz prosecutes felony DWI cases, which are constituted by three or more cumulative offenses, intoxication assault and intoxication manslaughter.

"Most of my cases end up in the penitentiary," Schultz said.

Smart Start acts as an expert witness for the state to prosecute probation violators.

"Interlock is a proven tool," Coffey said, public reaction to the volunteer program has been "excellent."