

The Sun

**Ignition locks urged for drunken drivers
Device would be must for repeat offenders**

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The county's top prosecutor said yesterday that he will ask Annapolis district judges to require certain drunken drivers to have special ignition systems installed in their cars to prevent repeated offenses.

State's Attorney Frank R. Weathersbee said ignition interlocks, which attach to the dashboard and require a motorist to blow into a tube to start the car, will be recommended when the driver is a repeat offender or has shown evidence of having a drinking problem.

The driver must breathe into the machine before turning the ignition key. If the driver's alcohol content is too high, the car won't start.

Weathersbee said marketing representatives convinced him that problems with the early models of ignition interlocks have largely been solved.

Judges have been authorized to order the use of the ignition locks since 1989, but problems with the devices have discouraged many judges from imposing them, Weathersbee said.

Some motorists were using balloons to get false readings on the interlock devices, and there were complaints that the devices often improperly registered alcohol readings, he said.

But the technology has improved to the point that the devices are curbing repeat drunken-driving offenses in other states, Weathersbee said.

"I think it's something we have to look at," he said.

The state's attorney said the three prosecutors in Annapolis will begin asking judges to include installation of the devices in their sentences this month. If it works in Annapolis, Weathersbee said, he will expand it to the larger Glen Burnie District Court.

The judges "might not do it. They might say this is stupid and the heck with it," Weathersbee said.

Judge Martha Rasin, administrative judge for the county District Court, said the devices are worth considering.

"It's just one more technique in the arsenal of things that are available," she said.

She said she hopes to hear presentations from companies that provide the ignition interlock at a meeting with the District Court judges in about three weeks.

Marilyn Corbett, a spokeswoman for the Motor Vehicle Administration, said about 30 drivers supervised by the agency have agreed to put interlock ignitions on their cars in exchange for reduced license suspensions after being convicted of driving under the influence.

In most cases, first-time offender had their license suspension reduced from about 120 days to 15 days if they agreed to drive with an interlock for up to six months, she said.

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The offender pays about \$65 to install the interlock and about \$2 a day to maintain it, Corbett said. The drivers must report to a private testing center once a month to make sure the device is working, she said.

Under a bill signed into law last week, the MVA will be allowed to offer the same option to drivers convicted after Oct. 1 of driving while intoxicated. The MVA may reduce the length of a license suspension in exchange for a driver's having the device installed, Corbett said.

To be convicted of driving under the influence, a driver must record a blood alcohol content of 08 percent or more. For driving while intoxicated, the level is 10 percent or higher, she said.

Corbett said interlocks reduced repeat drunken-driving arrests in West Virginia from 35 percent to half a percent during a two-year period.

Allen Baxter, vice president of Audio Connection Inc., a Columbia-based company that installs and monitors the ignitions, said the devices flag for inspectors attempts to tamper or disconnect it.

He said the company, one of several that offer the device, is using them to monitor 50 to 60 drivers in the Columbia area, 50 to 60 in Towson and about a dozen in Pasadena.

Caption:
PHOTO

Caption: Frank R. Weathersbee: Prosecutor wants devices installed.

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