



Bracelets keep drunken drivers out of jail, curb taxpayers' costs

By Erin Sauder

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GENEVA —

After having too many drinks one night in December, a St. Charles man slipped his keys into his car's ignition and didn't pull to a stop until flashing lights were in his review mirror.

But he didn't end up in a jail cell. Instead, like 145 other Kane County residents, he got a bracelet strapped to his ankle and was stripped of his right to drink for 180 days.

In April of last year, Kane County began offering the Secure Continuous Remote Alcohol Monitor as a way to keep those charged with driving under the influence of alcohol from clogging jail cells and bogging county taxpayers down as a result. Today, the county has become Illinois' No. 1 user of the alcohol-monitoring ankle bracelets.

The St. Charles resident, who asked to remain anonymous due to the sensitivity of his position, essentially pays for his own incarceration. Offenders pay between \$6 and \$15 a day to wear the device. Defendants, on average, wear the SCRAM bracelet for 200 days, with costs spiraling into the thousands.

A portion of the fee goes to a fund to help indigent users who cannot afford the fee. Taxpayers pay nothing.

The device, offered to multiple DUI offenders, monitors vapors from the skin hourly and sends them to a modem for data collection to make sure offenders do not drink as a condition of their bond or probation.

David Talarico, president of Alcohol Monitors of Illinois, which provides the device to Kane County, said the focus is on changing behavior.

"If we don't change behavior, the recidivism risk is very high," he said. "SCRAM is a tool to help with treatment and accountability."

For the St. Charles resident, the bracelet is a daily reminder of what happens when people choose to drive drunk.

"I'll never drink and drive again," said the 29-year-old salesman. "And it's not just because I don't want to get in trouble, but also because this has definitely made me think a lot more — I have to be careful with my actions. I know that one thing can lead to another."

These days, he is the designated driver among his friends.

"I make sure I leave my cell phone on so they can call me to pick them up," he said. "I'm trying to make it a positive instead of feeling sorry for myself."

He has also had to give up the bar scene.

"It makes you realize how much people go out drinking," he said. "This has made me get creative. I go bowling now more than I used to."

The ordeal forced him to also make changes in his hygiene, including switching his shampoo and body wash because of their alcohol content. The sensitive device on his ankle only tolerates bar soap.

Geneva police Commander Steve Mexin said any tool that will help prevent drunken driving is beneficial.

"To me, it sounds like a good idea," he said. "Any measure that can be taken by the courts that can address issues of alcohol and minimize the effects of it would certainly be a benefit to us all."

A woman pulled over for drunken driving in St. Charles and ordered to wear the bracelet lauds the device for keeping her out of jail.

"Doing jail time would have been really bad, especially having to talk to my employer about it," said the 43-year-old mother of two, who also wished to remain anonymous.

Formerly a habitual binge drinker, she said the bracelet has helped her address her problems with alcohol.

"I was using booze to make an uninteresting time more interesting. Now that I've had to take a year off from drinking, and that has changed a lot of things in my life for the better," she said. "I feel lucky that this happened to me."

But the ankle bracelet has not been without its hardships.

"My son knows what it is, and that's embarrassing," she said. "I keep telling him, 'I screwed up, and this is what happens.'"

Her youngest child thinks the bracelet is a glucose monitor for diabetes.

Ten Kane County judges have used the SCRAM device as a sentencing tool with a 90 percent compliance rate.

"It saves taxpayers an unbelievable amount of money by easing jail overcrowding," Talarico said. "And it forces accountability. You're not just letting someone out of jail, you're monitoring their behavior."

Inmates serving time in the Kane County Jail cost taxpayers \$74.50 per day.

Kane County State's Attorney John Barsanti said officials will use every tool at their disposal in the war against drunken driving.

"Our families and communities demand it," he said.

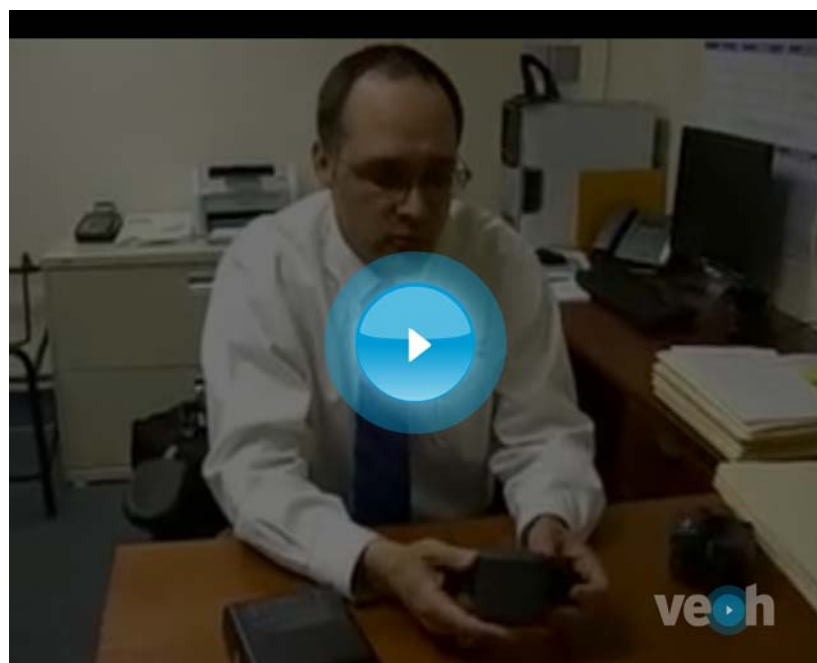
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Cost of offense

- \$74.50 Per-day cost of housing an inmate at a Kane County jail
- \$271,925 Cost to Kane County taxpayers to house one inmate per year
- \$12 Average cost for offenders to wear alcohol-monitoring ankle bracelets a day
- \$0 Amount it costs taxpayers

By the numbers

- 200 Average span, in days, of offender's sentence with bracelet
- 90 Percent compliance rate
- 146 Offenders on the program in Kane County



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