



Keeping them off bottle, out of jail

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They work better than a parent's curious nose. And they are saving us lots of money.

Secure Continuous Remote Alcohol Monitoring (SCRAM) is a system that employs a remote-controlled gizmo that is strapped to the ankle of someone charged with driving under the influence of alcohol. It constantly monitors the perspiration of the wearer to determine whether he or she has been drinking.

Kane County State's Attorney John Barsanti points to manifold advantages to using SCRAM. Not only have they kept down jail overcrowding - long a serious issue in Kane County - and kept DUI defendants sober between court dates, but they've freed up \$3.2 million over the course of 18 months to be spent in Kane County on something other than housing inmates.

Kane County started using SCRAM in April 2007. DuPage County pioneered it in Illinois in late 2006. Use of the technology has grown steadily in the past couple years. It's currently used in 1,650 jurisdictions in 46 states, according to representatives from Colorado-based Alcohol Monitoring Systems Inc., which makes SCRAM.

Kane County has used it with 430 defendants. Cook and Will counties have only dabbled in it, though. According to the company, Cook has only strapped up 28 defendants since January 2007. Will County is currently monitoring about 10 people and have only used the device on 25 people overall.

Neither Lake nor McHenry County have used it at all.

In Kane County, the 430 defendants have worn the device a combined 44,097 days. That's 108 days on average. And the compliance rate is about 90 percent, Kane County reports.

It's being used both as a way to keep people clean between court appearances but also as a sentencing tool to keep people on the straight and narrow. Kane County State's Attorney Barsanti likes it for its behavior-changing abilities.

Those who try to break or otherwise make the unit inoperable will get caught anyway and face more serious trouble. But they were going to drink anyway, Barsanti theorizes.

The wearer must stand near a modem in his home for a period of time each day for the unit to upload its information to a computer.

Here's where the savings comes in:

Wearing a bracelet costs the defendant - not the county - between \$6 and \$15 a day. It costs about \$73 on average to house an inmate for 24 hours. And a portion of the fee that's paid is held to help those who can't pay for it themselves.

The Pew Charitable Trust this year released a report examining incarceration in America. It says that one in 99 people in the United States is in jail or prison.

"This is the kind of thing we have to think about in the future," Barsanti said. "Alternative ways of getting things accomplished without having to resort to jail."

Other counties in the suburbs should take a close look at the success Kane County has had with SCRAM and consider wider use.