

'Black boxes' keep eye on bad drivers

Oakland court program, first of its kind, monitors moves of repeat traffic offenders.

By Brad Heath / The Detroit News

NOVI -- Drivers with a history of breaking the rules could soon find someone's watching to make sure they don't break them again.

A program in southwest Oakland County that targets drivers who repeatedly have run afoul of the law has started using "black box" technology to monitor whether some repeat offenders are driving safely. It's the same technology some nervous parents use to keep tabs on their teenagers' driving habits.

The program is believed to be the first in the state to target the drivers; it is also one of the first in the country to turn to the black boxes, which track everything from how fast a car goes to whether it takes corners too sharply. It follows a Detroit News investigation in 2003 that found drivers with long track records of defying the law are involved in one of every six fatal wrecks in Michigan and had killed more than 1,800 people over eight years.

"I'm kind of scared because they say it goes off when you go past 72 mph, and all the information goes back to your probation officer," said Billy Joe Ferguson, who was sentenced to the program after he was charged with driving with a suspended license. He lost his license after a 1988 crash that killed another driver; he was convicted of manslaughter and spent three years in prison. It was the eighth time since his release he was caught driving without a license.

He won't get his license back until at least March, he said.

Ferguson is one of 60 people who have been sentenced to the program, called DRIVE, which also includes group therapy, driving training and community service. Only three have since been cited for traffic violations, and none has returned to court on more serious charges or been involved in accidents, said 52-1 District Court Judge Brian MacKenzie.

"I'm delighted with it," said MacKenzie, who created the program last year. "The idea is to come up with a sentence that makes the individuals coming into the program better drivers, safer drivers, improving the safety of everyone around. And it seems to work."

For now, only drivers stopped in Walled Lake, Wixom and Wolverine Lake are included in the program, but MacKenzie said it's been successful enough that he hopes to expand it to include other parts of southwest Oakland County.

Larry Selditz, the president of Road Safety, the California company that makes the devices, said it's the first time he knows of a court ordering drivers to use them. So far, 14 people who were sentenced to the program have had the devices installed in their cars. The requirement applies only to people who are on probation and have a license; those who don't have one will take driving classes on a computer simulator.

The black box tracks how fast a car accelerates and how hard drivers slam on the brakes. It records whether the drivers go around a corner too fast. The devices ultimately will be outfitted with equipment so they can be tracked by satellite. All of that information is retrieved every month and sent to the driver's probation officer.

"It's not like Big Brother; it's a sentence that's trying to do the right thing, the appropriate thing to guarantee the community's safety," MacKenzie said. "It's not going to be in their car forever, but it's going to be there to demonstrate that they've learned to drive appropriately so that there's one less person who is sitting two inches off your bumper at 80 mph."

And there's more instant feedback: The box beeps loudly every time the car goes too fast or accelerates too rapidly.

"It's loud. When it goes off, you're going to know it. I put it in my car for a couple months and actually changed my driving because of it," said Todd Levitt, one of the founders of SENICA, a Livonia company that installs the black boxes for the court. "This is something that's going to help people. By changing their driving habits, it's going to cut down on accidents."

Most previous attempts to keep repeat offenders off the road have failed because they rely mainly on taking away someone's license, a step that has repeatedly been found to be ineffective. In 2003, The News found that nearly half of the drivers with bad records involved in fatal crashes had already lost their license. After that, legislators adopted a law charging yearly fees of up to \$1,000 for drivers who repeatedly defy the rules.

Novi's program includes drivers cited for reckless driving, a suspended license or leaving the scene of an accident. Police run the driver's record, and if there are two or more crashes or other problems, such as speeding tickets, the cases land on a fast track in district court. People found to have serious alcohol problems are not sentenced to the program because officials think it is less likely to be effective. Jason Smith was one of the first to be sentenced to the program after he was charged with driving on a suspended license in Novi. Around the same time, he got a second citation for driving with a suspended license in Huntington Woods; he was sentenced there to pay a \$150 fine. In Novi, he was sentenced to a year and a half on probation, 12 weeks of group therapy, driver training and community service.

"At first I thought I was getting railroaded here," he said. "I never quite grasped what I was doing. ... Now I'm so thankful that I got in."

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