



Senator Matt Bartle – Serving Jackson County

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Making DWI Convictions Count

Getting behind the wheel of a vehicle while intoxicated is one of the most dangerous acts imaginable because of the high probability for disastrous consequences. It only takes a split-second for an accident to occur. Too many families have been torn apart and too many lives ended prematurely by the selfish acts of a drunk driver.

Unfortunately many people never grasp the seriousness of driving drunk—and our judicial system isn't doing an adequate job in sentencing these offenders to serious jail time. The governor has asked for my help in fixing this problem, and I am pleased to work with his administration and with an array of law enforcement officials to craft legislation to address the issue.

For starters, Missouri needs to join a handful of other states that prohibit a person suspected of DWI from refusing to take a breathalyzer test. Statistics show that a significant percentage of people currently refuse to cooperate with police when they are asked to take this test. This will no longer be tolerated. The new legislation will make such refusal a separate crime and will empower police to take blood samples regardless of the person's refusal.

The second part of the DWI problem is that many municipal courts are running offenders through the system at an alarming rate with mere slaps on the wrist. For instance, according to the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, one St. Louis-area man has been arrested for DWI eight times, but he only has one DWI conviction. Unfortunately, these events are not rare. Some local courts routinely offer plea agreements to offenders that wipe the DWI off their records and ensure that the case is shielded from public view.

Unless this revolving door can be stopped, we may have to move DWI cases (especially for repeat offenders) into state courts where prosecutions will take place under state law instead of under local ordinances.

I look forward to fleshing out the details of this work-in-progress piece of legislation and getting input from my colleagues in the Senate when we convene for session in January. Taking a tougher stance on drunken driving will deter more people from getting behind the wheel of a car while intoxicated and will put repeat offenders in jail where they belong. Missouri can no longer tolerate irresponsible drivers who endanger the lives of those who travel our highways.

If you have any comments or questions about this week's column or any other matter involving state government, please do not hesitate to contact me. You can reach my office by e-mail at matt_bartle@senate.mo.gov or by phone at (888) 711-9278. My web address is <http://www.senate.mo.gov/bartle>.

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