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Crack down on DWI, even if some ignore law

It's hard to stop determined drunk drivers, but we must try.

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By all accounts, Laura Fortenberry was a cheerful and responsible person.

And by all accounts, the man charged with killing her, Howard Clay Pasour, is a repeat offender with an extensive arrest record who could not be deterred from driving drunk.

The case is a tragic reminder of the dangers of drunk driving, a practice still shockingly common despite decades of education and crackdowns.

It also raises questions about whether the system was too lenient on Pasour and suggests that changes to the law or its enforcement are needed to help reduce the frequency of drunk driving on North Carolina's roads.

Pasour's bond was set at \$4 million on Tuesday. Two days earlier, authorities said, his Jeep Cherokee sped across the center line of a Gaston County road and into a 1984 Oldsmobile, killing Fortenberry and injuring two others. It could take months for Pasour's blood-alcohol level to be determined, but the Highway Patrol said there were open alcohol containers in his SUV. Witnesses described him as having beer on his breath and driving erratically shortly before the wreck.

Pasour had three prior DWI convictions. He had spent 37 days in jail for two of those. His license was revoked. He was forced to wear an ankle bracelet that monitored his alcohol level for two months.

None of it, apparently, was enough. That may suggest there's only so much the state can do to block chronic drunk drivers from turning the key.

Even so, though North Carolina's DWI laws are considered strict, they need to be even tougher and more strictly enforced.

Pasour could have faced up to two years in jail for his third conviction, but received only 30 days. District Judge James Jackson should have given him a longer sentence, especially given his extensive record.

State law forbids ankle bracelets for DWI offenders for longer than 60 days. Lawmakers should consider whether a longer drying out period would better deter recidivism.

Some states require ignition interlock devices be installed on an offender's car after the first offense.

North Carolina generally waits until a second conviction (except in extreme cases). It shouldn't.

Penalties for a first offense should be harsh enough to serve as a true deterrent. And lawmakers should make drunk driving a felony sooner than after a fourth offense in 10 years, as under current law.

Laura Fortenberry was doing nothing wrong when her life was cut short at age 17. North Carolina must do everything in its power to prevent such tragedies from happening again.



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