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# Pass 'Laura's Law,' crack down on drunk drivers

**Rep. Tim Moore's bill is good, but could be even stronger.**

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Posted: Sunday, Feb. 13, 2011

Drunk drivers prowl roads in the Carolinas constantly. They should be seen for what they are: Not traffic scofflaws, but criminals, armed and dangerous.

Lawmakers in Raleigh may disagree on health care, budget cuts and education reform. But there should be no disagreement over the need to write the most effective DWI laws in the country.

About 400 people die on N.C. roads each year in accidents involving alcohol (it's even worse in South Carolina, where about the same number die though it's a much smaller state). Authorities make more than 70,000 DWI arrests in North Carolina each year, and about 35 percent to 40 percent of those involve repeat offenders, MADD says.

Two recent tragedies in the Charlotte region were especially galling. In July, Laura Fortenberry, 17, was killed when an SUV crossed the center line and hit the car she was in. Howard Pasour, who had been convicted of DWI at least three times, was drunk and behind the wheel, authorities say. And in October, police say, Kevin Ohagan of Monroe drove head-on into another vehicle. The wreck killed Daniel Herring, a father of three who had just played Jesus in a pageant. Ohagan had been convicted of DWI at least six times before.

In response to Fortenberry's death, Rep. Tim Moore, a Republican from Cleveland County, introduced "Laura's Law" last week. It provides tougher prison sentences for repeat DWI offenders, charges higher court fees and gives judges the ability to require offenders to wear alcohol-monitoring ankle bracelets for much longer than the current 60-day limit.

Lawmakers should strengthen Moore's bill, then pass it. The ankle bracelets have been proven effective and the state's failure to keep them on chronic offenders beyond 60 days is indefensible.

But the bill doesn't go far enough.

It should also require an ignition interlock device after the first offense and for drivers convicted of driving with a .08 blood alcohol level, not the .15 level that's required now.

Judges should stop the endless continuances that DWI suspects are granted in some counties.

And while long prison sentences are sometimes warranted, a determined alcoholic will eventually drink and drive again. That's why legislators should bulk up the number and scope of DWI treatment courts. Mecklenburg's court enrolls repeat offenders in an intense program that includes any jail time as well as treatment, case management, frequent alcohol screening and court appearances. The program is cheap compared with prison and, supporters say, boasts a tiny recidivism rate of 2 to 3 percent.

Lawmakers should pass this bill quickly, and help prevent tragedies like those that killed Laura Fortenberry and Daniel Herring.



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