

24/7 Program Sails Through Committee

By MIKE DENNISON IR State Bureau | Posted: Tuesday, January 25, 2011 10:03 am

HELENA - A House panel this morning unanimously endorsed a bill to expand a new program that breath-tests drunken-driving suspects, as one lawmaker called it a "game-changer" in preventing drunk driving.

The House Judiciary Committee approved House Bill 106, which would direct the state Justice Department to help expand statewide the 24/7 Sobriety Program that's been tried in Lewis and Clark County since last spring.

Attorney General Steve Bullock, a Democrat, is strongly behind the measure and testified for it last week.

One of the bill's most vocal proponents this morning was Rep. Krayton Kerns, R-Laurel, a leader of the conservative wing of his party. Kerns said it's a rare day that he'd support proposals by the Democratic attorney general, but that he thinks the 24/7 program "actually offers a solution" on drunken driving.



Dylan Brown Independent Record Dylan Brown Independent Record - Attorney General Steve Bullock talks last March about the new 24/7 Sobriety Program that was implemented in Lewis and Clark County, while Mayor Jim Smith, center, and Country Attorney Leo Gallagher, right, watch. The plan sailed through the House Judiciary Committee Tuesday morning.

"The thing I like about this is it takes a whole new approach to the problem," Kerns said.

Bullock said this morning that he's pleased to see bipartisan support for "this simple, effective and low-cost approach to combating DUI in Montana."

"All across our state, folks are demanding change," he said. "This morning, the Judiciary Committee took a big first step toward saving lives, making our highways safer and holding drunk drivers accountable for their actions."

HB106, sponsored by Rep. Steve Lavin, R-Kalispell, now heads to the House floor.

The 24/7 Sobriety Program requires anyone arrested for a second or subsequent DUI to submit to a breath test twice a day until their case is adjudicated.

Supporters say it helps keep DUI suspects sober until their case is tried, keeps people out of jail and speeds up the process.

Kerns said while he likes HB106 and the 24/7 program, he'll be opposing bills that are "more of the same," such as increased penalties or prison time for DUI offenders.

HB106 is one of more than a dozen DUI-related measures before the 2011 Legislature, aimed at preventing and cracking down on drunken driving.

Several have been endorsed by the House Judiciary Committee and several key proposals await action in the Senate Judiciary Committee.

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