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## South Dakota alcohol project inspires copycats

The rural US state of South Dakota is curbing crime with a hardline programme aimed at problem drinkers. The scheme is catching the attention of policy makers in regions as far away as Hawaii and the UK, as the BBC's Catrin Nye reports.

Laverne Volk walks in Sioux Falls jailhouse and up to a counter where he hands over his dollar bill and blows hard into a breathalyser.

"Morning, Laverne," he is greeted. The women behind the counter here know him. They know most of the people on the programme by name. They see them every day, twice a day.

There's a click - the reading's zero.

Volk, 47, walks swiftly out of the building, like most of the others who have blown into the breathalyser today.

South Dakota's 24/7 Sobriety Program requires participants to take the twice-daily breath tests to prove they are not drinking excessively.

Volk, who has four drink-driving convictions, says he has not drunk at all since being put on the programme, but things used to be very different.



Sobriety test centres are available across South Dakota

"Alcohol's been a problem all my life. I was mostly drinking on the weekends, about half a case - sometimes on Sundays and sometimes during the week," he says.

He adds: "I know I had a problem. But now I'm sober. It [the 24/7 Sobriety Program] is a pain, but it works."

Other participants coming in to "blow" are less positive.

Andres Torres, 30, was also convicted of driving under the influence. Now he can only ride his motorbike to work and to the test centre.

He says being tested twice a day is completely invasive.

"The program is a huge inconvenience, and I really don't think it's very effective in what it's trying to achieve, especially for the people who have the most serious alcohol problems," he says.

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## **24/7 Sobriety Program**

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*Between Jan 2005 and March 2010*

- 14,647 participants
- 2,896,353 total tests
- 2,875,982 passed tests
- 20,372 failed tests

"People with a serious problem come in, they blow hot [positive], they can't complete the programme and they just end up back in jail."

Torres has already been to prison for his driving offence. He argues he has done his time and should not still be paying for it.

The testing process here in Sioux Falls is swift.

One woman enters the building in full Lycra - fitting the test into her morning jog.

But the programme does limit how far you can travel from test centres, which are located all across the state.

The tests can be used as a sentence, as a pre-trial condition or imposed upon parents as a condition of having children returned to a household.

### **'Severe consequences'**

In Sioux Falls, the largest city in South Dakota, participants must show up for their first test of the day between 0600 and 0900 and for their second between 1800 and 2100.



**I was a frustrated local prosecutor because alcohol was involved in every crime, so the sheriff and I set upon this plan, frankly out of desperation” - Larry Long South Dakota judge**

They pay their dollar to take a breath test, and if it is clear of alcohol they leave.

If, however, the test is positive, the person is given 15 minutes to sit down and retest - and another positive reading leads to more severe consequences.

Lt Scot Pfeiffer, supervising on the day the BBC visits, says that of the more than 350 people who come each day to take the test, on average up to three will fail or not show up.

He says that someone can drink a small amount and still get a clean reading - a failure signals that the participant has been drinking to excess.

That failure causes the participant immediately be taken to the jail's holding area, put in prison "stripes" and placed in front of a judge the same day.

Depending on a person's record he or she may get 24 hours, 48 hours or possibly a week in prison.

The theory is that the short, sharp consequences of failing the test give an offender a taste of life inside - but prisons are not made crowded for long periods of time.

Judge Larry Long first came up with the programme in the early 1980s, when he was a prosecutor in tiny Bennett County in South Dakota.

Judge Long says he was seeing the same people day in, day out, and prison was not stopping their drinking.



If an individual fails one of the state's sobriety tests, he or she could face up to a week's stay in prison

"I was a frustrated local prosecutor because alcohol was involved in every crime, so the sheriff and I set upon this plan, frankly out of desperation," he says.

"These people were coming through the system time and again for the same reason. They had had too much to drink, and they had gone out and driven a car or beaten on their wives. It was a lifestyle and we knew if we could get them separated from alcohol we could save them," Mr Long says.

The pilot started and has grown from there.

It was in 2007 that South Dakota's legislature unanimously created the 24/7 Sobriety Program, giving authority to the Department of Corrections and the Board of Pardons and Paroles to use it.

### **Dealing with addiction**

Officials also say additional help is available for people with more serious alcohol problems.

They cite statistics showing an improvement in road safety and a drop in South Dakota's prison populations since the programme's inception.

Marty Jackley, attorney general for South Dakota, says the programme's success is down to removing the problem at its source.



**The 24/7 Sobriety Program is being piloted in other places**

"I think it could work very well in other places," Mr Jackley says.

"Whether it's Montana or North Dakota or any place seeing the benefits, it's the underlying concept - if you have an individual that's getting into trouble with the law because of alcohol, you have to deal with the addiction.

"It's cost effective, and I don't think you're infringing on people's rights when the alternative is to put them in jail."

The programme has already been introduced in North Dakota and is being piloted in Montana.

Policy makers in London and Hawaii are looking at how it could be adapted to deal with their problems.

Officials from Hawaii have recently spent time in South Dakota looking at how the programme works.

In London, the mayor's office hopes the 24/7 Sobriety Program can be adapted for other drink-related crime, notably drunken violence.

In July 2010, the UK Home Office reported that the total cost of alcohol-related crime and disorder to the UK taxpayer was estimated to be between £8bn (\$13bn) and £13bn (\$21bn) per year.

And in 2009, almost one million violent crimes were alcohol related, with a fifth of all violent incidents taking place in or around a public house or nightclub.

<http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-us-canada-11506181>