

Get as tough as other states on multiple DUIs

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Washington State Patrol Trooper Guy Gill performs a field sobriety test on the side of Interstate 5 during a DUI emphasis patrol in December 2012. CHELSEA KROTZER — Staff photo

For chronic drunks who don't want a handful of DUIs to stop them from getting behind the wheel, Washington is one of the best states in the nation.

Of the 45 states that have a felony DUI charge on their books, Washington is the only one where a person can avoid being charged with a felony until he gets a fifth DUI — and that's within 10 years!

Of course, a felony already can be charged in DUI cases in which someone is killed or injured, such as felony vehicular homicide and vehicular assault. But just getting pulled over multiple times for driving under the influence indicates that a person likely has a serious problem — one that could lead to death or injury.

That's why most states have gotten tough on drivers with two or more DUIs. They cause a disproportionate amount of the carnage on our highways.

The majority of states make DUI a felony after three or four offenses within a certain time period. Indiana is the toughest, making a second DUI within five years a felony. New York and Oklahoma allow a longer time period for the second DUI to be committed: 10 years. Only Washington has the most lenient policy of five DUIs over 10 years.

That should be brought closer to national norms. Under Senate Bill 6090, which passed out of the state Senate's Committee on Law & Justice Tuesday, a fourth DUI within 10 years could trigger the felony charge.

The proposed change came out of an Impaired Driving Workgroup created in 2013 by the Legislature to devise strategies to address deaths and injuries caused by driving under the influence. It's supported by the state's prosecutors, including Pierce County's Mark Lindquist, as well as sheriffs, police chiefs and the Washington Traffic Safety Commission.

Supporters acknowledge the costs associated with imprisoning more drunk drivers but believe that would be offset by the value of getting dangerous individuals off the road for longer periods of time.

And a tougher policy likely would have a deterrent effect on some drivers — especially those who have had three DUIs in the past 10 years. Knowing that a fourth would trigger a felony charge — and real prison time — could inspire some to seek help for their substance abuse problem — or at least find a designated driver.

If the vast majority of other states can cope with the cost of tougher felony DUI laws, so can Washington. State lawmakers have made some important strides in recent years against drunk driving. Passing SB 6090 is the logical next step.

Read more here: <http://www.thenewstribune.com/2014/01/31/3021336/get-as-tough-as-other-states-on.html#storylink=cpy>