

Md. legislature passes bill targeting drunk-drivers

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By Aaron C. Davis

Ending a multiyear “mud-wrestling match” between Maryland’s House and Senate over drunk-driving laws, thousands of additional drivers arrested annually for drunk-driving will be required to breathe into breathalyzers to start their vehicles’ engines if they want to retain their rights to drive.

Under [compromise legislation that passed the House](#) and went to Gov. Martin O’Malley on Saturday, Maryland drivers under 21 who are caught with any alcohol in their blood would be required to participate in the state’s so-called ignition-interlock program.

Drivers pulled over on suspicion of driving under the influence who refuse a roadside breathalyzer, or those who fail such a test with a blood alcohol content of .15 or more, would also face mandatory participation in the program.

But the legislation is not nearly as comprehensive as advocates had sought. Maryland’s chapter of [Mothers Against Drunk Driving](#) had lobbied state lawmakers for a second straight year to pass a bill to require every one in Maryland convicted of first-time drunk driving to have one of the devices installed in their vehicles.

Amid a national lobbying effort by MADD, 11 states have begun requiring the use of the ignition interlock devices for all standard drunk driving convictions.

“It’s been a mud-wrestling match [with the House of Delegates] for years. We didn’t get all the way to the end zone, but we got past the 50-yard line,” said Sen. [Jamie Raskin](#) (D-Montgomery), who sponsored a tougher measure backed by MADD that passed the Senate. His bill was toned down in recent days in negotiations to pass the House Judiciary Committee, where similar legislation died last year.

“The bill tells kids ‘don’t touch alcohol and drive’ or you’ll have one of these in your car,” Raskin said. “And it gets these in cars of thousands of repeat offenders”

Under the bill, anyone convicted of a second drunk-driving offense in Maryland would be required to have the devices installed. The technology won’t let a car’s engine start until the driver successfully breathes into a device and it verifies that the driver is sober.

According to Maryland’s motor vehicles department, about 8,000 drivers last year rotated through Maryland’s ignition interlock program, with 6,000 of those required to use the devices at any one time. Most were repeat offenders or offenders who refused a sobriety test, or who failed a blood-alcohol test with a result of .15 or more.

State legislative analysts estimated that Raskin’s bill would have added an additional 9,000 drivers annually to the program.

Under the compromise legislation, he estimated that about 4,500 additional drivers annually would be required to have a breathalyzer.

Last year, a bill that would have required first-time drunk drivers to use an ignition interlock breathalyzer passed the Senate, but hit a roadblock in the House Judiciary committee, chaired by Joseph F. Vallario Jr. (D-Prince George’s).

A week after the bill died, Vallario wrote in a letter to his committee last spring that [he regretted the bill’s failure](#). He agreed to the compromise this year.

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