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Editorial: Fight DWI with ankle bracelets

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New DUI device at Office of the Prosecuting Attorney, in Alii Building. The device is worn on the ankle and sends out signals telling if the subject is drinking.

Crews are now wrapping up this week's installation of festive City Lights displays fronting Honolulu Hale. Shaka Santa and Tutu Mele are situated on their spot at the fountain edging the lawn, and yuletide tree lights will be switched on Saturday evening. Last week's nod to the holiday season at city hall struck a more somber note.

That's when — for seven consecutive nights, ending Sunday — Honolulu Hale was illuminated in red in recognition of Mothers Against Drunk Driving's annual "Tie One On For Safety" campaign. Since 1986, MADD has asked motorists to display red ribbons as a November-December reminder to themselves and others to always designate a non-drinking driver.

Some of the most dangerous days on our nation's roadways are between Thanksgiving and New Year's Day, and last year 26 percent of all traffic fatalities nationwide during this time were caused by drunken drivers. In

Hawaii, as police put in place seasonal sobriety checkpoints, the state is also poised to move forward with an effort that aims to keep repeat DWI (driving while impaired) offenders away from the steering wheel.

Courts statewide may soon require drivers charged with driving while under the influence of an intoxicant within five years of a prior conviction to be fitted with an alcohol-monitoring ankle bracelet. The device, which reads perspiration to determine alcohol consumption, holds potential to help combat drunken driving, thereby making our crosswalks and roadways safer.

The bracelet technology can and should be used in conjunction with other tools, including ignition interlock devices. Both are credited with reducing incidents of impaired driving.

Last year, the state Legislature approved a measure giving courts the option to tap the bracelets for habitual intoxicated drivers, and established a process through which low-income offenders may get some financial relief as they pick up costs. A state law that allows ignition interlock devices has been on the books for several years.

State figures persuasively underscore an ongoing need to employ a variety of tools designed to reduce the count of alcohol-related fatalities. In 2015, of 93 traffic fatalities in Hawaii, 51 were linked to alcohol and/or drugs.

Also that year, according to state records, 17 percent of all adjudications for operating a vehicle under the influence of an intoxicant (OVUII) were repeat offenders. That added up to more than 1,070 repeats — drivers who continued to drink and drive despite previous dealings with judicial penalties.

In Honolulu, first-time offenders lose their driver's license for a year, must undergo at least 14 hours of substance abuse rehabilitation, and either spend two to five days in jail, pay a fine of up to \$1,000 or perform at least 72 hours of community service. The penalties get heavier with each subsequent conviction.

Still, it's a given that some repeat offenders with alcohol dependency issues will not stop drinking on their own. In those cases, a continuous monitoring device should be combined with a lengthy behavior-changing treatment program.

Such a program was established on Oahu five years ago. Honolulu's DWI Court offers nonviolent offenders opportunity to attain sobriety through a yearlong court-regulated intervention support. It can be a win-win — for the offender, whose sentence is stayed pending successful completion, and for the community, as reducing recidivism increases public safety.

Earlier this month, consultants with the ankle bracelet's manufacturer, SCRAM Systems, trained judges, probation officers and prosecutors on Oahu, Maui and Hawaii island on how to use the technology. It has already been in use in Honolulu District Court for four years.

Here's hoping that by next year's holiday season, courts statewide will be using the bracelet as an effective deterrent to drunken driving — and that all DWI numbers, especially fatalities, take a turn for the better.