

CRIME AND COURTS

Remote breath testing program gets a first run in Davison County

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Davison County Jail Corrections Officer Kim Beltran demonstrates how the remote testing equipment works with an online database, allowing the jail to monitor test results digitally. (Marcus Traxler / Republic)

Some new technology is getting a test run for the Davison County Jail in 2020.

A portable remote breath device is being used by administrators for the first time this year, allowing a little more flexibility in the strict regimen of 24/7 sobriety testing.

Davison County has had a couple of individuals on the remote breath alcohol testing device from Scram Systems. The program has internet capabilities and logs the test results, a GPS location of where the test is taken from and a photo of the subject taking the test. That happens twice a day, just like the traditional breath tests taken at the county's Public Safety Center, but now those tests can be taken off-site.

"It gives the person on the program a little more flexibility to test," Davison County Jail Administrator Don Radel said. "Obviously, their sobriety is No. 1 and keeping their driver's license is a big deal too. A lot of times it's a condition of bond and they can get out of jail if they're participating and passing."

Judges in the First Judicial Circuit have the freedom to decide which individuals qualify for the program and the method of testing in the 24/7 program. The 24/7 testing is commonly used as a condition of bond, as a condition of sentencing or as a part of probation or parole.

The devices are administered by the state of South Dakota, and passed down to 24/7 sites like in Mitchell. Radel said Davison County has just a couple of units after they were reallocated during the start of the coronavirus pandemic in March and April. The machines are about \$1,200 apiece and counties pay a per day fee to rent them, but that is covered by the fee the subject pays to be on the program. Individuals in the remote program still come to the Public Safety Center once a week to have their machine checked to make sure it hasn't been tampered with.



A remote breath testing unit is pictured at the Davison County Jail recently. (Marcus Traxler / Republic)

The traditional twice-a-day breath tests done at the Public Safety Center cost \$2 per day, while the remote testing program costs \$5 a day for the user. Third program that Davison County uses, which uses an ankle monitor that can detect alcohol through a person's sweat, is the most expensive at \$6 per day, and those funds are then split between the county and state for administering the programs.

The portable remote breath machine is just another tool that is available, Radel said.

“They still have to test twice a day and it still has the capability of us programming a surprise test in the middle of the day or the middle of the night. It has facial recognition and each test that they do has a picture taken and it's compared to what they have on file to make sure everything is operating as it should.

Subjects are alerted via a text message about the timing of the testing and then have 20 minutes to test through the machine. If they fail the test on the first try, they have another 15 minutes to test again. Administrators of the 24/7 program are alerted with test results, with all of the results logged into a database that they can monitor. Skipping a test or failing a test means that individual is subject to being arrested and put in jail.

“If there's a discrepancy in the test or a hot test or some sort of tampering with the machine, we get alerted through email,” Radel said.

Statewide statistics show that the remote program is having success. Since South Dakota began using the program in February 2019 through Oct. 31, 2020, 756 participants have been part of the remote breath monitoring program. Users have had a 93.3% compliance rate, with 543 failed tests and more than 185,000 passed tests, according to the South Dakota Attorney General's Office.

The vehicle ignition interlock system, which requires a clean breath test to start a car, is the state's best 24/7 program, with 99.89% of test subjects passing. The ankle bracelets have a test compliance rate of 99.5%, including 71% of its participants fully compliant since 2006.

In all, since the 24/7 preliminary breath tests since South Dakota started its program in 2005 have a 98.8% pass rate, with more than 11 million tests administered to 37,000-plus participants.

Traditionally, Davison County has about 80 individuals in the 24/7 program each day, Radel said. He said the county will continue to work its way into the program and potentially add machines in the future.