

Allegheny County court fines pay for ads targeting drunken driving

By [Bobby Kerlik](#), PITTSBURGH TRIBUNE-REVIEW

Tuesday, December 27, 2011

Money well spent

Money for the commercials comes from people who didn't heed the warnings.

The ads are part of an \$85,134 campaign in 2011 by Allegheny County pretrial services, an arm of the state courts, that includes other radio spots, television ads and a designated driver booth at Penguins games.

The money used to pay for the campaign comes from \$100 fines imposed on people convicted of driving under the influence. Motorists convicted of having double the legal limit of alcohol in their system -- or 0.16 percent -- or more pay a \$200 fine.

State law requires that court officials use the money for substance abuse treatment or prevention programs. Officials call the public service announcements money well-spent because treatment programs for one person can cost thousands.

"We reach a lot more people through prevention," said Janice Dean, head of county pretrial services. Her department provides information to judges setting bond in criminal cases and monitors nonjailed defendants awaiting trial.

This year's allotment is about half of the total amount that the department spends on prevention programs. The county spends the other half on school programs that reach 30 to 40 districts, Dean said.

Last year, officials spent \$118,121. This year's total is nearly five times more than 2007's expenditures of \$17,470, records show.

Al Blumstein, a Carnegie Mellon University professor at the Heinz School of Public Policy who specializes in crime analysis, said perhaps some of the money could be directed back to people convicted of DUI to provide help for them or additional oversight.

He cited other states, including Hawaii and South Dakota, that have more involved supervision of people convicted of DUI to help them recover from addiction problems.

"I don't have a good sense (of whether the ads are effective or not). I would guess they're of limited value. Rather than an ad to the broad public, maybe the money should be targeted to people with a problem," Blumstein said.

Stephen Erni, executive director of the Pennsylvania DUI Association, a nonprofit that supports highway safety programs related to alcohol and driving, disagreed. He said counties spend money on treatment programs.

"What I've seen is that there's less and less money available for drug and alcohol prevention," Erni said. "Sports venues are an effective way to spend money on prevention, including the designated driver booths. It's not just putting up a billboard. We want people to think about the safe way to get home."

Erni said Allegheny County's school programs are particularly good. His organization this year honored county pretrial services for its prevention strategies.

"It's better to try and solve a problem before it's a problem," Erni said.