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Demand for bail bonds peaks prior to holiday; DUI sweeps not a boon to business, owners say

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SALT LAKE CITY — Odds are, posting bail for a loved one awaiting trial in your local county jail wasn't on your Christmas list this year.

But owners and managers of local bail bond companies say business often peaks the week before Christmas. They're generally busier then than New Year's Eve, Labor Day or summer holidays when law enforcement typically conduct saturation patrols to pick up drunken drivers.

The statewide DUI blitz conducted over this past New Year's Eve, for instance, resulted in 72 arrests, Utah Highway Patrol authorities said. A complete count will be released Tuesday, officials said.

Clint McQueen, co-owner of Liberty Bail Bonds, said DUI enforcement blitzes can lead to an uptick in business but it is often because the people arrested also have outstanding warrants or face other charges related to the drunken driving arrest.

"A DUI is only bondable for \$1,500 so the jails don't hold them very long," McQueen said of first-time offenders. "There's just not enough room in the jail for them."

In Salt Lake County, many people arrested in drunken driving sweeps are referred to Pre-Trial Services, which can offer release, supervision and tracking of eligible defendants after they are booked into jail. Those people never require the services of a bail bonds company, McQueen said.

McQueen said his service is busiest prior to Thanksgiving, Christmas "and believe it or not, Mother's Day."

"We get a lot of calls from mothers who want to get their son out of jail so they can spend the day together or from sons that say 'I want to be with my mom on her day.'"

Oddly, many people bailed out close to holidays are people facing domestic violence charges, he said.

"I see a lot of guilt on the part of parents for their child. People will say 'I wasn't the best parent. Maybe if I do this, it will help them,'" McQueen said. "Maybe they shouldn't be bonding their child out because it's really not teaching them anything."

Larry Nowak of Bad Boys Bail Bonds said, he, too, has higher demand for his services during the winter holidays.

"In the beginning of December, families usually leave their family member in jail," he said. "The closer to Christmas, everyone starts feeling bad if they're not home for Christmas."

Nowak said business picks up, too, as people are arrested for retail theft and other offenses aimed at obtaining cash to buy holiday presents.

Nowak said his business goes as the capacity of local jails go. Bad Boys Bail Bonds has agents statewide and business was brisk on New Year's Eve in Uintah and Cache counties, he said. In Cache County, for instance, a woman arrested for an alleged drunken driving offense had a blood-alcohol level twice the legal limit and backed her car into a UHP trooper's vehicle after she was pulled over for suspected drunken driving.

Nowak said saturation patrols over holiday weekends are well publicized so many revelers plan accordingly. Either they selected a designated driver, ride taxis or avail themselves to car tows when they've had too much to drink.

"You really don't get the business out of it that you think you would," Nowak said.