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WISCONSIN STATE SENATOR

SENATE MAJORITY LEADER

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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*NOTE: This column is being submitted by Sen. Scott Fitzgerald for your consideration to print.*

## **Legislative Republicans Combat Drunk Driving** Measures to Target Repeat Offenders, Focus on Treatment Become Law

This week, Governor Walker signed Assembly Bill (AB) 657 and AB 455, two measures advanced by Legislative Republicans to help combat drunk driving in Wisconsin. This session, Republicans focused on long term solutions to our state's OWI problem, advancing proposals to increase funding for treatment and stiffen penalties for repeat offenders.

I was proud to be the lead Senate author of AB 657, a proposal which increases funding for state Treatment and Diversion (TAD) programs by \$2 million each year. This common sense program has been proven effective at treating substance abuse and reducing recidivism. Unlike simply hiking monetary penalties and jail time, the TAD program targets our drunk driving problem at its root, by treating alcohol and drug addiction to reduce the number of impaired drivers on Wisconsin's roads. I believe that this approach will take meaningful steps towards making our streets safer because studies of treatment programs have shown that participants are significantly less likely to relapse or engage in criminal activity.

A treatment-centered approach has an upside for Wisconsin's taxpayers too. Instead of increasing local corrections costs by throwing more OWI offenders in jail, our investment in treatment today will help to reduce corrections costs for Wisconsin's taxpayers down the road. According to a four year study by the University of Wisconsin Population Health Institute, participants in state TAD programs were nine times less likely to return to prison than other offenders. That translates to an average savings of \$1.93 for every dollar invested in alternative treatment programs.

The increase in TAD funding continues Legislative Republicans' focus on treatment from the Biennial Budget which launched a 5-county pilot of a 24/7 Sobriety Program. Mirrored after a successful version implemented in Winnebago County in 2011, the program gives the state another new tool to combat alcohol and drug abuse. Participants receive twice daily testing for

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alcohol use with the threat of immediate sanctions, an approach proven to reduce recidivism in participants.

While we hope that our focus on treatment has a real impact on drunk driving in Wisconsin in the future, we also take the current threat to public safety very seriously. That is why we approved AB 455 to increase penalties for multiple offenders and make any fourth offense a felony, aligning Wisconsin's laws with those of other states.

We have made dramatic strides in the last decade towards reducing the impact of drunk driving on our state. Crashes, injuries and fatalities related to alcohol have been cut in half, and more than two-thirds of drivers who receive a first OWI never reoffend. For those who do not have a substance abuse problem, the high societal and financial costs associated with the first offense are nearly always an adequate deterrent to getting behind the wheel while intoxicated. Alongside stiff penalties, we will continue to focus on making treatment available for those who need it to produce a lasting and meaningful impact on drunk driving in Wisconsin.

*Senate Majority Leader Scott Fitzgerald (R-Juneau) represents the 13th Senate District, which covers portions of Dodge, Jefferson, Waukesha, Washington, Dane, and Columbia counties.*

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