

THE \$25,000 MARTINI

[BY: KERRISA CHELKOWSKI]

Long gone are the days when the bartender says, "How about one for the road?" A drink with friends after work can turn into the biggest financial quandary one may ever face. Driving while intoxicated offenses are at the forefront of America's legal system. Whether considered driving while intoxicated (DWI) or driving under the influence (DUI), the bottom line is DWI's are expensive.

A fine is just the start of what you will pay for an intoxication conviction. Insurance rates increase, legal bills swmount, alcohol treatment, and licensing fees can push the cost into five figures. A DWI conviction is a financial disaster. Not considering the extreme humiliation and hassle a DWI has a horrible effect on your wallet your professional future.

A veteran San Antonio Police Officer explained: "If I pull you over and you have the odor of alcohol on your person especially between the hours of 10pm and 4am on Thursday through Sunday, I don't care who you are I am placing you under arrest. It's not worth the risk." The road side stop is embarrassing and dangerous enough by performing tests on a busy highway in the dark, but now you are in handcuffs, in the back of the police vehicle. It is time to make that dreaded phone call. Bail costs can range from \$150 to \$2,500 for a first offense, but can increase to \$100,000 or more depending on the seriousness of the offense.

Driving privileges are highly affected from a DWI arrest. Towing your car from the scene can cost you from \$100 to \$1,200. "If you get a DWI conviction, it will likely affect your insurance rates for (at least) the next three to five years," says a local USAA insurance agent. You may be moved to a high risk section of the department or may be dropped altogether. You will have to keep your nose clean, no traffic tickets or feilder benders for at least five years to bring your rates down to the low premiums you once enjoyed. The cost of the insurance nightmare - \$5000 or more.

Unless you decide to represent yourself you will need to hire a lawyer. Because most professionals have more on the line than just their wallet this is a very important decision. Some lawyers may charge as little as \$500 to enter a quick plea, but with so much at stake, many professionals accused of DWI fight the charge. Entering a plea to a DWI offense is an instant conviction and loss of your driver's license. This is not a decision to make lightly. Legal representation can cost from \$4,000 to \$25,000 depending on the complexity of the defense and qualifications of the lawyer. A vigorous defense may include representing you at the license revocation hearing, hiring an investigator to examine the arrest scene, and hiring expert witnesses who can testify to the inaccuracies in the field sobriety tests and breath test procedures. Whether considered high or low the legal fees may be the most important investment in the process of one's case.

Fines and court costs can range from county to county in Texas, but one fact remains the same they add up and they increase year after year. A fine can be as high as \$2000 for a first time offense. The courts add additional costs such as

alcohol evaluation screenings, alcohol education and treatment programs, and cost of court proceedings. Depending on the intensity of the programs these costs may range from \$750 to \$4000. If one is convicted of a DWI whether through a plea bargain or a jury verdict these fees are not negotiable. If you ever want to get your license back these treatment programs are required. There is no deferred adjudication probation for a DWI in Texas. Whether entering a "no contest" or "guilty" plea to a DWI is the same as a jury finding you guilty. The conviction will remain on your record forever. Not exactly a resume builder

If you are convicted and your license is suspended you must pay a license reinstatement fee, petition for an occupational license, and pay a surcharge to the Department of Public Safety for a period of three years. This will cost you over \$3500. If you are convicted of a second intoxication offense that costs jumps to a minimum of over \$6500. And of course as in any venture there are the hidden costs and additional fees. For example, a Crime Stoppers fee, probation supervision fees, Victim Impact Panel assessment fees, victim compensation funds, and restitution if an accident was involved. If the judge considers that you were particularly drunk an ignition interlock device will be ordered on your vehicle and any vehicle you have access to. These costs will range from \$1500 and up.

Finally, there are the unexpected and sometimes unquantifiable costs. Life-insurance premiums may increase because of the driver's license suspension and credit history could be negatively affected. Further, lost time from work, as a result of court dates, community service, treatment programs, and possible jail sentence, always equals lost money and clientele. For many people an arrest may result in losing one's job and a conviction may mean all the open doors before the arrest will suddenly shut. If you are a doctor, stockbroker, airline pilot, lawyer, teacher, or nurse, a DWI conviction could affect the status of your professional license. Many people find devastating effects to their work when they lose their license. A license may be suspended anywhere from 90 days to two years depending on the seriousness of the offense.

So in the end can you afford that Martini? DWI's are pricey. For professionals the biggest thing is sometimes the stigma that you get. That stigma does not have a financial cost, but the stigma does have both a social cost and a professional cost. DWI's affect everyone - professionals cannot avoid this fact, but they can educate themselves and consider the real costs behind happy hour. □

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