



News **Local News**

Is it time to take the keys?

02:23 PM CDT on Friday, June 8, 2007

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The story is not uncommon: an elderly person drives toward a familiar location and gets confused.

In Elizabeth Richards' case, the 89-year-old Bedford woman was returning home from a manicure when she became disoriented and headed about 160 miles northeast to southern Oklahoma. Her body was discovered Wednesday inside her locked car in a rural part of Choctaw County. She had been missing for almost a week.

It wasn't the first time Ms. Richards had gotten lost.

Last year, she mistakenly drove to Denton County following a shopping trip to Grapevine, her family had said. That time, she found her way home.

On any given day, it is likely that someone with mental impairment is missing, said Bryant Martin, a spokesman for the Greater Dallas Chapter of the Alzheimer's Association.

"This is a very serious reality," he said.

Not only are patients suffering from dementia or Alzheimer's a possible danger to themselves when they get behind the wheel, but they also pose a threat to other motorists if they become confused by traffic signals and the mechanics of a car, he said.

The Texas Legislature began tackling this difficult issue with new laws that make it more difficult for senior citizens to renew driver's licenses and that expand the Amber Alert system to include missing senior citizens.

"Katie's Law," named after a Dallas teen killed last year by a 90-year-old driver who ran a red light, requires people at age 79 or older to renew their licenses in person. It also shortens the amount of time between license renewals.

The law, which goes into effect Sept. 1, will call for Texas Department of Public Safety employees to test the vision of elderly drivers more frequently. Employees also may, at their discretion, ask drivers to

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[The Greater Dallas Chapter of the Alzheimer's Association's Safe Return Program](#)

retake a written or driving test if they appear to have other physical or mental health issues, said Angie Cervantes, a policy analyst for state Sen. John Carona, R-Dallas, one of the sponsors of the bill.

Steven Polunsky, a spokesman for the senator, said the law is meant to protect seniors and “prevent another unfortunate tragedy like what happened to Katie Bolka.”

Family members can take measures to prevent an elderly relative from unsafe driving, Mr. Martin said, such as asking the elderly relative to relinquish the keys. **Also Online**

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Some senior citizens may resist, viewing this request as a curtailing of their independence. But if someone else can provide rides, giving up keys may not seem as rough of a transition. Family members also should reduce the need for the elderly relative to drive and provide alternate forms of transportation, Mr. Martin said.

If an elderly parent does not volunteer to give up driving, families should seek the professional advice of a doctor, attorney or insurance agent. A doctor can write a prescription that prohibits driving. An attorney can explain the legal ramifications of unsafe driving.

Sometimes it is easier for people to take advice from third-party authoritative figures. “The elderly put a lot of faith in their doctors,” Mr. Martin said.

If that attempt also fails, Mr. Martin said, it may be time to hide the keys or disable the car. He also advised moving or selling the vehicle so that its presence does not remind the elderly parent to drive.

Family members also can contact the DPS to revoke a driver’s license, he said.

Technology also may help families keep track of their loved ones. Companies now provide GPS devices in tags, cell phones and even shoes.

NEW LEGISLATION

Katie’s Law

Named after a Dallas teen killed last year by a 90-year-old driver who ran a red light at the intersection of Preston Road and Royal Lane. The new rules require people at age 79 or older to renew their licenses in person. It also shortens the amount of time between license renewals.

Status: To take effect Sept. 1

Silver Alert

Patterned after the Amber Alert, which allows law enforcement to alert media and public about missing children who have been abducted or are in danger. The Silver Alert will focus on senior citizens.

Status: Bill awaits Gov. Perry’s signature

Sources: Offices of state Sen. John Carona, R-Dallas, and state Rep. Joe Pickett, D-El Paso.