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Sunday, November 04, 2007

Senior safety on the road

Renewing your license just got tougher for older drivers

Published Thursday, September 20, 2007

By Brandon Evans

Melba Sanderfer of Decatur sees better at 80 than she did as a young woman.

"I had surgery on my cataracts last year," Sanderfer said. "I see better now than I have since I was 27 years old."

Sanderfer's vision has improved so much following her surgery she no longer needs to wear her glasses.

But Sanderfer is an exception to the norm, and a new state law addresses the combination of driving and the deteriorating vision that usually accompanies age.

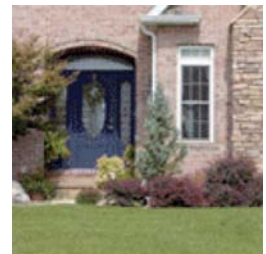
House Bill 84 requires all drivers 85 years of age and above to pass a vision test before having their license renewed. Licenses issued after age 85 are also only valid for two years instead of the usual six.

The new law also prevents drivers age 79 and older from renewing their license online or through the mail, forcing seniors to renew in person at a Texas Department of Public Safety office.

In addition, DPS now has the authority to require a written test and a driving test of any driver renewing their license if they feel greater scrutiny of the driver is required.

The bill took effect on Sept. 1, 2007, and it only applies to driver's licenses issued or renewed on or after that date.

The new law is also known as "Katie's Law." A fatal traffic accident led to its creation. Katie Bolka, 17, was en route to a math exam at the Ursuline Academy in Dallas on May 30, 2006, when a 90-year-old driver sped through a red light and struck Bolka, causing fatal



injuries.

Katie's parents, Rick and Johna Bolka, have focused their efforts ever since their daughter's death to encourage new legislation regarding elderly drivers.

"As our nation's population ages, and the number of elderly drivers increases, many of these individuals may experience deterioration in vision and reaction times," the Bolka's report on their Web site www.katieslawtexas.org. "Additionally, a considerable proportion of the elderly driving population may experience a decrease in cognitive functions, mental diseases such as dementia or Alzheimer's, all of which can lead to impaired driving skills. As a matter of public safety, there is a strong need for testing individuals as they age to insure the safe operation of a motor vehicle."

Sanderfer supports Katie's law.

"I definitely do," she said. "A lot of people who get older don't want to admit that they might not drive or see as well... I think they should even lower the vision test age down to 80."

Sanderfer was playing a game of 84 (a variation of the domino game 42) with a group of seniors at the Decatur Senior Center on Monday. She was not the only one that agreed with the new law, all of them did.

"I can tell you it is a good idea," said Rebecca Burns, 83. "My vision is already slowing down."

Hazel Mooney, 90, of Decatur just missed the new law. She mailed in her renewal card last month.

Most of the seniors playing dominoes at the center on Miller Street already undergo vision tests regularly. They also complete defensive driving classes in order to save money on their insurance costs.

While the typical renewal cost for a driver's license is \$24, the two-year licenses have been cut back to \$8.

Nine other states already have laws requiring vision tests for senior drivers.

