

# Seniors under watch on road

## Law requires tests for elderly drivers

By Nicole King

[nicole.king@amarillo.com](mailto:nicole.king@amarillo.com)

Publication Date: [02/18/08](#)

Eighty-seven-year-old Ernie Russell feels confident when he drives, despite his failing eyesight. Though he no longer drives at night, he said he's a good driver.

"Our eyesight gets bad and our reflexes get worse, and I think that's a good law."

Edith Miles, 73

His friend, Shirley Curry, 71, isn't so sure.

"He crosses the center line," she said.

Now, Texas has a new way of checking Russell's ability. New laws that went into effect in September apply to seniors who renew their driver's licenses.

Drivers 85 and older have to renew their licenses every two years and must pass a vision test. Drivers 79 and older have to renew their licenses in person rather than over the Internet or through the mail.

State law already allows Department of Public Safety employees to require driving tests if applicants, no matter what age, appear disoriented or otherwise unable to drive.

The changes are part of Katie's Law, named for Katherine "Katie" Bolka of Dallas. Bolka died in May 2006 while on her way to school to take a math test after a 90-year-old driver ran a red light and crashed into her at 45 mph.

Her parents, Rick and Johna Bolka, worked tirelessly to get the laws passed.

"It's a shame that it had to take a little girl so violently and horrifically killed," Johna Bolka said. "I never thought that we would see ourselves in this form. It's a shame that these laws weren't in place before."

Rick Bolka said the state needs to become the first line of defense.

"If you leave the responsibility up to the individual, there are going to be individuals who aren't going to realize that they shouldn't be driving, and you can't depend on the individuals and you can't depend on the individuals' families," he said. "The government has a responsibility to protect its citizens."

Gracie Haddock Lack, 78, of Amarillo, realizes some of her fellow seniors shouldn't be on the road.

"We have quite a few idiots who go in and out of the lanes," she said. "I love people. I hope I never have to stay at home by myself. I hope the Lord takes me home first. If I thought that I was a menace to other people, yes, I surely would (give up my license)."

Other people don't feel that way. Tela Mange, spokesman for the Texas

Department of Public Safety, has received some complaints from seniors about having to come in to renew their licenses.

"They're not very excited about having to come, but I think that they understand that it's for their safety and everyone else's safety," she said, adding that some of the things Public Safety personnel determine are "whether they appear to be able to operate a motor vehicle safely" and "if they're not able to walk very well or see very well."

Laura Reyher, a registered nurse for Baptist St. Anthony's Home Care and Hospice, said as people age, their vision and hearing decline, their strength decreases and they become confused.

"You've got to travel some fairly complicated routes, and traffic is fairly heavy out there," she said. "Senior adults are also sometimes on a lot of medications that can contribute to them being drowsy or confused. A lot of them are also developing Type 2 diabetes which can contribute to driving difficulties."

Amarilloan Edith Miles, 73, said she thinks the new laws are a good idea.

"Our eyesight gets bad and our reflexes get worse, and I think that's a good law," she said. "No one wants to give up their mobility. I'd rather give it up than not drive safely and not have sense enough to know."

Miles' daughter, Sue Nelson, 53, said the law can step into situations where it may be difficult to tell older family members it's time to give up the keys.

"Some family members may know better, but mom may not listen," Nelson said. "Where if it's a law, it's far more easier to accept than a family member telling you. I have a mother-in-law who's 88. She's had a stroke. She has no business driving, but she won't give up driving."

Lack said not enough people her age worry about their driving.

"Some of them shouldn't be driving," she said. "I realize there are a lot of people who don't have any other transportation and feel confident, but that's their opinion."

The Bolkas said they would like to see Texas become the model for legislation regarding elderly driving.

"Johna and I's goal is to make the law here in Texas the standard in the country," Rick Bolka said. "We have to attack this one state at a time."

"The bottom line is this - when you lose a child, you live in hell," Johna Bolka said. "I couldn't sleep at night knowing that my husband and I didn't do something to stop this from happening."

### **On The Net:**

- [cdc.gov/ncipc/factsheets/older.htm](http://cdc.gov/ncipc/factsheets/older.htm)
- [www.katieslawtexas.org](http://www.katieslawtexas.org) According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention:

- In the United States, 3,355 occupants ages 65 and older died in motor vehicle crashes during 2004.

- In the United States, more than 177,000 adults ages 65 and older suffered nonfatal injuries as occupants in motor vehicle crashes during 2005.

- In 2004, there were more than 28 million licensed drivers age 65 years and older - a 17 percent increase from the number in 1994. During the same time period, the total number of licensed drivers increased by only 13 percent.
- By 2010, the Department of Health and Human Services aims to reduce motor vehicle-related deaths among people of all ages to no more than eight per 100,000 people. For adults older than age 70, the motor vehicle death rate has remained stable at about 23 per 100,000 for more than a decade.
- Drivers ages 80 and older have higher crash death rates per mile driven than all but teen drivers.
- During 2005, most traffic fatalities involving older drivers occurred during the daytime (79 percent) and on weekdays (73 percent); 73 percent of the crashes involved another vehicle.
- Older drivers who are injured in motor vehicle crashes are more likely than younger drivers to die from their injuries.
- Older adults wear safety belts more often than any other age groups except infants and preschool children.
- Among older occupants involved in fatal crashes, 75 percent were using restraints at the time of the crash, compared to 62 percent for other adult occupants (18 to 64 years old).
- Older adult drivers tend to drive when conditions are safest. They limit their driving during bad weather and at night, and they drive fewer miles than younger drivers.
- Older adult drivers are less likely to drink and drive than other adult drivers.

Click here to return to story:

[http://www.amarillo.com/stories/021808/new\\_9105744.shtml](http://www.amarillo.com/stories/021808/new_9105744.shtml)

© The Amarillo Globe-News Online