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## Experts discuss best, safest ways to keep seniors on the road

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ST. PETERSBURG, Fla. - Senior drivers are nothing new in Florida, but each year makes the state's roads a little grayer.

And Florida's current crop of older drivers is just a taste of what the nation can expect as Baby Boomers age. By 2020, state officials estimate that one in four drivers will be 65 years or older. Nationally, about 40 million seniors are expected to hold driver's licenses by then.

Crash data show that seniors aren't necessarily more accident prone than younger drivers, but they are at greater risk of dying or being seriously injured in a crash. While drivers ages 65 and older accounted for 14 percent of U.S. traffic fatalities in 2006, experts expect the number of serious accidents involving seniors to climb as that population ages.

Some states are testing older drivers for mental and physical acuity. In Canada, some provinces are requiring doctors to report patients who shouldn't be driving. In many cases, tougher testing is opposed by seniors because they fear that losing one's driver's license is equivalent to losing one's freedom.

"Driving is a privilege, which we often forget in this country, but mobility really is a right," said J. Peter Kissinger, president and CEO of the AAA Foundation for Traffic Safety, which has been studying the issue. He is one of dozens of presenters at this week's International Conference on Aging, Disability and Independence, a three-day gathering of researchers around the world discussing everything from traffic roundabouts to robots.

While states have traditionally looked at solutions based on a driver's age, that isn't necessarily the best way to deal with seniors, Kissinger said. He said senior driver safety will require better road design, more education and the cooperation of doctors, children and drivers to know when it's time to take away the car keys.

Dr. Bonnie Dobbs, a researcher at Canada's University of Alberta, said the focus should be on drivers who are unable to drive safely anymore.

"We have shifted away from the older drivers to the medically at-risk drivers," Dobbs said while explaining a pilot program in Edmonton that enlists doctors to help determine when patients should turn in their keys.

"It's important that we don't target older drivers," she said.

Dobbs said seven out of 10 Canadian provinces require doctors to report patients who have conditions that may impair their ability to drive, a mechanism not commonly used in the United States.

Data offers a mixed view of senior citizens as drivers.

Crash data charted by age frequently looks like a bathtub, with fatality rates higher for the youngest and oldest drivers.

Experts say the difference is that older drivers aren't as dangerous on the road, but are more vulnerable to being killed or seriously injured in accidents.

"Older drivers don't get into the same crashes that 16-year-olds do," said Russ Rader, a spokesman for Insurance Institute for Highway Safety.

Seniors' mistakes behind the wheel are often high profile, and can prompt changes.

Last year, Texas enacted "Katie's Law," named after a 17-year-old Dallas girl killed when an older driver ran a red light.

The law requires Texas residents 79 and older to renew their licenses in person and submit to mandatory vision tests. Drivers 85 and older now have to renew their licenses every two years, rather than six.

Massachusetts Gov. Deval Patrick said this month that he is looking into legislation that would require older drivers to prove they can still handle a car safely. His remarks came after an 86-year-old man lost control of his car and struck a second-grader who was standing outside a polling place on Super Tuesday.

"There are really great and able seniors and people of the same age who are not as able," Patrick said during a monthly radio call-in show.

Florida has had several horrific crashes caused by older drivers as well. Since 2004, Florida has required vision tests for drivers 80 and older who renew their licenses.

Rick and Johna Bolka, who championed "Katie's Law" after their daughter was killed, said they understand concerns from seniors that new restrictions will hurt.

But if standards aren't changed, crash rates and deaths for senior citizens will rise dramatically, Rick Bolka said. The couple plan to ask Oklahoma lawmakers to adopt a similar version of "Katie's Law," which they said they hope becomes a national model.

Policy makers changing the driving rights of seniors must take into account that they still have to get around, said Elinor Ginzler, a director with AARP.

"When people stop driving in the United States of America, they slide over and become a passenger in a vehicle" or a pedestrian, Ginzler said.

Experts warn that many places don't have the infrastructure to accommodate aging residents who give up their cars.

Florida is especially lacking in its transit options, said Dave Bruns, an AARP official in Florida.

He and Ginzler both said training for older drivers can help them stay on the road longer. They also said states should also consider making greater investment in medical review boards that can evaluate driver safety on a case-by-case basis, and require people to renew their licenses in person.

Because of Florida's demographics, many expect the state will be influence policies on senior drivers.

"Florida will be an example for the nation," Bruns said. "The question is, will it be a good example or a bad example. That's up to us."

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