

The Older Driver: Not a Problem Driver

Frequently, during our youth, we focus on the thought of obtaining a driver's license. It is viewed as a rite of passage into adulthood and represents a newfound freedom. As we age, we fall into a category labeled "older driver." As aging progresses, we can expect to find that the operation of a motor vehicle can become difficult and at times dangerous. America is aging, life expectancy is increasing, the number of licensed drivers is increasing, and more older drivers are continuing to drive. America's older driver population will increase rapidly as we enter into the 21st century.

Is this older driver population being viewed as a problem when driving?

Older people suffer a variety of medical conditions that may affect their operation of a motor vehicle. Some of the medical barriers that confront the older driver and hamper the ability to operate a motor vehicle are:

- Vision loss
- Slowed reaction time
- Dementia
- Alzheimer's disease
- Some medications

Non-medical barriers to safe driving operation also hinder the older driver. These may include:

- Interior design of a motor vehicle
 - Seats that cannot be raised to accommodate a person's shape, size, or medical condition
 - Seat belts that are difficult to use because of limited mobility
 - Interior seating that does not provide for the comfort of the operator
 - Illogical dash display locations
- Exterior design of a motor vehicle
 - Car doors that are heavy and cumbersome
 - Trunk lids that are heavy and difficult to open and close
 - Visibility problems due to pillar post placement
 - Motor vehicles that are larger in size
- Roadway engineering barriers
 - Worn or damaged road markings
 - Illegible and unreasonably sized font on traffic control signs

Solutions

Solutions to problems faced by the older driver are available. Self-assessment and self-regulation are an essential element in older driver traffic safety.

Self-assessment includes paying close attention to signs of aging that eventually appear. Vision problems, recurring pain in the back and joints, forgetfulness, or loss of motor skills are problems that cause an older driver to be unsafe while operating a vehicle.

An older driver may consider *self-regulation* by eliminating nighttime driving due to vision problems. An older driver will more readily decide to turn in a driver's license if other options are available. Public transportation, rural social services involving transportation, and concerned family members can ease the transition from autonomous mobility to reliance on other forms of transportation.

Law Enforcement Role

Law enforcement performs an integral part in the assessment of older driver capability. The law enforcement community must work with established civilian and government agencies to develop alternatives and solutions to the mobility needs of older people. Some of the areas the law enforcement community can explore, in collaboration with other agencies, are materials development, progressive training, information programs, and self-assessment techniques for the older driver.

Law enforcement leadership can adopt policies to present solutions to questions concerning older drivers. Conducting educational town meetings at retirement communities, creating older driver auxiliary assistance groups, and a sincere commitment to the community are essential elements in addressing the concerns of older drivers.

All older drivers are not problem drivers. Older drivers are concerned about actions regarding driving ability that base conclusions strictly on age, not performance. Law enforcement must be prepared to accept the lead in opposing this trend.

