



National Association of Area Agencies on Aging (n4a)

# Older Driver Safety Project

*For Caregivers Who Are Concerned about the  
Safety of an Older Driver – Help is at Hand*



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### INTRODUCTION

“I’m glad I caught you while you were in town to visit your dad. You need to stop him from driving—he runs the stop sign in front of the bank regularly and almost caused an accident on the highway last week.”

Not the greeting that you’d hoped for from your parent’s next door neighbor during your holiday visit from 1,000 miles away?

Family caregivers, especially those who are separated from their older relatives by long distances, may be unaware of many aspects of their family members’ lives. Sometimes, there is information the older relative chooses not to share.

Are you unsure about how to start a conversation about your concerns? Initiating conversations with older adults about driving can be difficult but the following tips may help you prepare for such a conversation.

Here are just a few basic tips:

- Observe and document driving behavior so that you can give specific examples and patterns noted.
- Emphasize the goal of preserving independence and mobility while ensuring safety.
- Realize that there are steps (such as driver assessment, vehicle or driving modification, and refresher training) that can often keep the older driver safely on the road longer.
- Start early to investigate and promote alternative modes of transportation.
- Investigating and intervening in someone else’s life is never easy. But, if the issue of concern is the safety of an older driver or those around them, then there are many resources available. Here are some of the best that we have found.

# When You Are Concerned— A Handbook

LePore, P. R. (2000) “When You Are Concerned—A handbook for families, friends and caregivers worried about the safety of an aging driver.” Albany: New York State Office for the Aging. This report, prepared by Phil LePore, recognized as an expert in caregiving and safe driving, is available at:

<http://www.aging.state.ny.us/caring/concerned/handbook.pdf>

This very useful document offers details on signs to look for and essential observations and information to collect. It provides insight into family dynamics and structuring difficult conversations related to driving.

Although some parts of the publication are New York-specific, most of the contents are broadly relevant. This very popular publication has not been updated and two points that should be added include: (a) there should be a reference to the use of the Eldercare Locator for initial contacts with the aging network and (b) the reader should be familiar with HIPAA guidelines that might limit some of the third party contacts suggested.

The checklist of driving safety concerns included here comes from this publication. Also in the book are lists of medical and behavioral concerns.

“While many older persons know when to surrender the keys, there are others who continue to drive when they are at-risk. For families, friends and caregivers, the issue of what to do about an aging loved one who is at-risk driving can be both perplexing and paralyzing. Families who have been faced with the dilemma of what to do have often reported taking a year or more to act!” (Introduction, “When You Are Concerned.”)

## Unsafe Driving Checklist

If any of the following apply, you should consider taking appropriate action.

- Doesn't obey stop signs, traffic lights or yield right-of-way
- Doesn't obey other traffic signs (no left turn, no turn on red, etc.)
- Drives too slowly—usually well below the speed limit
- Gets lost routinely—is taking 2 hours to get to the hairdresser or home
- Drives aggressively
- Stops inappropriately
- Doesn't pay attention to other vehicles, bicyclists, pedestrians, road hazards
- Doesn't stay in lane when turning and driving straight
- Driver's spouse, companion, driver's friends, or passengers repeatedly comment about close calls, near misses, driver not seeing other vehicles or unsafe driving
- Has been involved in multiple fender benders
- Has been ticketed for moving violations
- Gets honked at often.

*Source: LePore, P. R. (2000) "When You Are Concerned—A handbook for families, friends and caregivers worried about the safety of an aging driver." Albany: New York State Office for the Aging.*

## How to Understand & Influence Older Drivers

"How to Understand & Influence Older Drivers" is a booklet published in 2006 by the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration (NHTSA). It covers many of the same topics as the LePore publication but is a shorter and updated version of the information. It also walks the caregiver through essential observations and the structuring of the difficult conversation

about changing driving skills. However, it also adds some critical contacts and steps: self-assessment resources for the older driver, evaluation by a rehabilitation specialist and use of modifications intended to extend safe driving, and specifics on the creation of a mobility plan to be implemented upon the cessation of driving.

“How to Understand and Influence Older Drivers” is useful for broad distribution but could also be used for a presentation on caregivers and transportation concerns or a workshop on how to deal with safety concerns: how to organize your observations, collect information, and create and carry out a plan—either to enhance driver safety or to plan for alternatives to driving.

You can see the booklet by going to [www.nhtsa.dot.gov](http://www.nhtsa.dot.gov) and typing the title into the Search box in the upper left hand corner. It will take you to the booklet as a PDF file. If you would prefer to order hard copies (available in batches of 25), just send a request by fax to the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration, fax # 202-366-7721. (n4a Older Driver Safety Newsletter, October, 2006)

## Family Conversations with Older Drivers

“Family Conversations with Older Drivers: Safe Driving for a Lifetime.” Developed by The Hartford Financial Services Group, Inc. and the MIT Age Lab, this on-line resource is based upon surveys, focus groups, and interviews with caregivers. It proceeds through the steps of preparing for a conversation, having the conversation, and help beyond the conversation. It also includes very useful worksheets:

- Warning Signs for Older Drivers Worksheet—to observe and track driving behavior over time and to identify patterns
- Getting There Worksheet—to identify and assess transportation alternatives most appropriate for this driver

- The Transportation Cost Worksheet—which allows the driver to compute the annual cost of owning and operating a car.

Go to <http://www.thehartford.com/talkwitholderdrivers>.

## Driving When You Have a Challenge

NHTSA also offers brochures in a series called “Driving When You Have...” The “haves” include Cataracts, Seizures, Macular Degeneration, Parkinson’s, Glaucoma, Arthritis, Sleep Apnea, and Diabetes. Also included are Driving and Alzheimer’s, Driving When You Are Taking Medications and Driving When You Have Had a Stroke.

Warning signs, points for observation, and tips are offered for specific conditions.

Go to [www.nhtsa.dot.gov](http://www.nhtsa.dot.gov), click on Traffic Safety, click on Older Drivers, then look under Publications for the specific condition.

### For Further Information

Contact the advocacy group for the condition. For example, the Alzheimer’s Association has resources of its own and, in addition, can direct the caregiver to the best information available from other sources. In this case, this might be:

“At the Crossroads: Family Conversations about Alzheimer’s Disease, Dementia & Driving,” another Hartford product.

This is available at <http://www.thehartford.com/alzheimers/>. Click on brochure.

You can view it on line, download it, or order it without cost.

# The Step By Step Approach

As reported in the December, 2006/January, 2007 n4a Older Driver Safety Newsletter, there are Steps to Safety, multiple steps that can reduce the risks for older drivers.

## Driver Assessment – step one

The first step is a self-assessment. There are various tools for drivers to use to assess their skill level including the AAA's Roadwise Review. This computerized assessment can be administered in one's home. To order a copy of the DVD, go to [www.seniordrivers.org/home/toppage.cfm](http://www.seniordrivers.org/home/toppage.cfm).

If no problems are indicated, then it is not essential to continue. However, it might still be helpful to participate in a driving review class, such as the one offered by AARP—and participation might reduce car insurance premiums. AARP Driver Safety information is located at [www.aarp.org/life/drive](http://www.aarp.org/life/drive).

## The Driver Rehabilitation Specialist – part of the solution

The next steps are best accomplished with the help of a professional—a Driver Rehabilitation Specialist. These specialists, numbering about 550 in the U.S., are trained to evaluate driving ability and make recommendations for remediation or compensation for areas that need strengthening and offer training to the older driver.

Having difficulty with some of the many functions that make up the skill set necessary for driving does not mean that it is time to stop driving. But it can mean that it is time to do it differently. And this is where the driver rehab specialist comes in.

The specialist is most often an occupational therapist (OT) who carries out a thorough clinical assessment of the individual's physical and cognitive functioning. In addition there must be an assessment of driving skills on the road. This step is critical in observing actual driving behavior—and is much more telling than an interval with a simulator. This step might be carried out by the OT (in some states, an OT who has also been licensed as

a driving instructor). In other cases, the test might be carried out by a driving school's instructor, who then consults and collaborates with the therapist to develop a plan.

The specialist may then make recommendations for adaptive equipment, for changes in driving habits, and/or training that will enable the driver to continue to drive safely in the community. If adaptive equipment is used, the specialist may also train the driver on using the modified equipment.

If, however, the specialist determines that it is no longer safe for the individual to drive, then he or she should offer advice on developing alternative means of transportation. The specialist may also consult with the family or caregiver.

### **Specialists – How to find them**

Specialists can be found through the Association for Driver Rehabilitation Specialists (ADED) and the American Occupational Therapy Association (AOTA).

The ADED's Certified Driver Rehabilitation Specialists (CDRS's) can be found by using the website, <http://aded.net>. The AOTA's specific sub-website, [www.aota.org/olderdriver](http://www.aota.org/olderdriver), includes a link to Find a Driving Rehab Specialist (in addition to other useful information).

There might also be driving instructors or driving schools in the community that advertise older driver evaluation or re-training. They need to be explored carefully to be certain that there is a clinician involved. Most driving instructors do not have a medical background.

Since these are professional services, there are fees involved and amounts will vary. Medicare generally will not cover the fees nor will insurance companies, following Medicare's lead. However, keep in mind the value of a professional evaluation. As suggested by Elin Schold Davis, Coordinator, AOTA Older Driver Initiative, "If the driver were told he needed a \$300 brake job to drive safely, would you advise that he ignore that suggestion and just keep driving?"

## Types of Vehicle and Driving Adaptations – What fits the best?

Adaptations can sometimes mean the difference between continuing to drive safely and no longer being able to drive.

To name just a few of the possible devices, there are: wide angled mirrors to compensate for decreased range of motion in the neck; seat cushions to bring one up to a height of maximum visibility; left-foot gas pedals and pedal extenders as well as low-effort and no-effort brakes for those who have decreased function in the foot; and steering knobs and reduced effort steering systems for decreased hand-strength.

There is a DVD available that demonstrates the use of simple adaptive equipment that can make the difference between driving safely and not. This was created by the Gerontology Institute at the University of Massachusetts Boston. It is “Keep Moving Longer: Features for Safe Driving” and demonstrates how the use of simple modifications can make it easier and safer to drive a car if the driver is experiencing physical or sensory challenges.

To order a copy of the DVD, send a check for \$6.00 payable to “Gerontology Institute” to U Mass Boston, Gerontology Institute/Keep Moving Longer DVD, 100 Morrissey Blvd., Boston, MA 02125.

And there are adaptations in driving methods, some of which are very simple: driving only during daylight hours; driving only in non-congested areas or in non-rush hours; or even making three right turns instead of a left.

Training might take the form of a defensive driving course or individualized help in modifying lifelong driving habits (such as a tendency to be aggressive or to speed).

Finally, the last step: Most of the resources mentioned have materials useful in planning a mobility strategy for and with the older adult. Investigate the transportation options in the community and create a road map to keep the older adult as mobile and as engaged as possible—it will be better for his or her mental and physical health—and for yours as well.

## And, A Final Note:

Whatever approach is chosen, be sure to start thinking about mobility options sooner rather than later—never consider “taking away the keys” without figuring out how you are going to replace them.

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*Advocacy. Action. Answers on Aging.*

*For more information:*

**Older Driver Safety Project**

National Association of Area

Agencies on Aging (n4a)

1730 Rhode Island Avenue, NW

Suite 1200

Washington, DC 20036

Phone: 202.872.0888

Fax: 202.872.0057

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