Giving up the keys: Campaign helps seniors stay independent after driving

By Laura Ungar
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At 79, Norma Hanna feels safer taking the subway than driving much of the time — and envisions giving up the keys for good at some point.
The Rockville, Md., senior has plenty of company in our aging nation, where people 85 and older are now the fastest-growing group of drivers.

A new campaign launched Tuesday by the National Association of Area Agencies on Aging aims to help older adults realize when giving up driving may be the safest choice and make the transition to public transportation or other ways of getting around. As it stands, seniors often see driving as synonymous with independence. And those who do decide to stop are unaware of their options, so they visit family, friends and church 65% less and take 15% fewer trips to the doctor just when they need medical care the most.

“It’s a big life change when someone gives up the keys,” says Virginia Dize of the association’s National Center on Senior Transportation. “Very often people don’t know who to call in the community. People don’t know where to go when all of a sudden their daughter can’t take them to the doctor.”

And this phase of life can last a while.

“The reality is people will outlive their driving years,” by an average of a decade for women and seven years for men, says Elinor Ginzler, senior director for supportive services for Jewish Council for the Aging of Greater Washington, which runs a support group for seniors thinking about giving up the keys. "Too many people don’t plan for retiring from driving in the way they plan for retiring from work."

To guide seniors through what can be a difficult time, the association, which represents a network of 622 area agencies on aging nationwide, has developed a brochure to educate seniors and help them prepare and act — to create a "road map" to life without driving. It includes a transportation needs checklist to help seniors visualize their options and costs.

It points out that the physical and sensory skills necessary to drive well tend to decline with age, and suggests seniors ask themselves whether they still like driving after dark if
their night vision has worsened or driving on the freeway if their reaction time has slowed. It advises they get regular eye exams and health checkups, have driving skills evaluated by a professional and check in with family and friends about possible changes in their driving.

The organization also suggests that seniors scout out alternative transportation options, such as public transit, paratransit for people with disabilities, volunteer transportation or private-pay services such as taxis, Uber or Lyft. If they choose public transit, travel training courses may be available to help them learn those systems.

Association CEO Sandy Markwood says the campaign evolved because transportation is the No. 1 issue among seniors contacting a call center they run, part of the Eldercare Locator, which connects older adults with services they may need.
Some areas have more transportation resources than others for seniors who don’t drive, Dize acknowledged. “It really depends on where you live in this country,” she says.

In the Washington area, for instance, Hanna is quite comfortable using the Metro and sometimes also relies on cabs or her daughter to give her a lift to Metro stations. She also still drives occasionally, though not at night, and recently participated in the Jewish council’s support group to help her make the transition to public transportation.

“I’m really happy,” she says. “I have my independence.”

But seniors can have a much tougher time in other parts of the country. Barbara Gordon, director of social services for the Louisville, Ky.-based KIPDA Area Agency on Aging, says most of her state is rural, and “transportation options are very, very limited in the rural areas.”

There are some options. In Louisville, the state’s largest city, there’s a bus system and an organization called Louisville Wheels, which provides transportation for seniors and disabled people to medical appointments and other places they need to go. Gordon’s agency also provides vouchers to reimburse family, friends or neighbors for transporting seniors in areas where public transit is scarce.

“Our major goal is to help older adults live in the community as long as possible,” Gordon says. “But we have limited funds and limited resources, so we don’t meet the entire need.”

Carolyn Holman, 69, and Barbara Sutton, 86, are two of the lucky ones. They both live in Louisville and get around mostly by bus.
Holman says her car recently gave out, and she didn’t have the money to fix it. So with the help of training from KIPDA, she’s become adept at using the bus system — although she admits “it’s a huge adjustment. You can’t just pick up and go.”

Sutton doesn’t have a car anymore, although she still has her license. But she says the bus is a great option when she has to go to the grocery store, drug store or doctor’s appointments. The only problem she’s had is when some bus drivers start driving before she’s had a chance to sit down.

Still, she says, "99% of the time, it’s very convenient and comfortable."

**Information:** The Eldercare Locator call center can be reached at: (800)677-1116.