Drivers, old and young

The coming surge in older drivers, and a possible uptick in the number of crashes they could cause, was the subject of a briefing this week to delegates on the Environmental Matters Committee.

A panel presented some of the latest data collected by the Maryland Motor Vehicle Administration, and pointed firmly at drivers 65 and older as being at increased risk of causing an accident, a demographic that will only grow as the Baby Boomer generation ages into its later years over the next three decades. The MVA is in the middle of a two-year study investigating of issues related to older drivers. The final report is due in January 2014.

Based on the interim report, which was not immediately publicly available, those advocates argued reasonably for more robust screening for older drivers.

Specifically, the age group most at risk of causing an on-road accident are drivers 80 and older. According to the Administration on Aging, about 20 million Americans are estimated to be 80 and older by 2050, triple today's population. We can predict from that an uptick in the number of crashes. Increasing the risk of crashes, about 40 percent of people 85 and older are estimated to suffer some form of dementia.

According to the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration, young drivers are the most likely to be injured or killed in a vehicle crash. Between 2007 and 2011 in Maryland, 15,801 crashes involved young drivers aged 16 to 20; an average of nearly 10,000 people involved in those crashes were injured and roughly 90 people a year died. Nationwide, from 1998 to 2007, NHTSA data show 39 to 43 percent of teen drivers aged 15 to 20 were killed in crashes involving a fatality. In 1998, 8,819 fatal crashes involved a teen driver. That declined slightly to 7,650 in 2007. Compare that to fatalities for 65 and older drivers from 2000 to 2009, which declined 18 percent, from 3,997 to 3,297, NHTSA states, while the population of the age set has increased 13 percent, from 3.5 million to nearly 4 million across the same period.

This information available seems to indicate a more nuanced approach is necessary to gauge driver fitness after a crash. The Legislature, if it chooses to take on this issue, should not deal exclusively with senior drivers when there's another demographic that also needs scrutiny.

A system for the review of problematic older drivers does exist through the Driver Wellness and Safety Division to help filter out older drivers who may need to retire from the road. Drivers can be reported for review to the Medical Advisory Board, which determines how capable a person is to operate a motor vehicle. In the case of age, law enforcement, physicians, courts and family members can make the referral.

That program, where it deals with senior drivers, can be made stronger. The number of referrals for medical review has been decreasing, according to the MVA. When the program began in 2009, 6,374 people were reviewed, by 2012, 4,374. Perhaps it's not easy enough or not enough people know reviews are available, and perhaps reviews should be triggered automatically for drivers 70 years and older following an accident.

And, as with other states, we'd support more frequent license renewals to bolster screening. The AAA recommends every five years for drivers 75 and older. That's reasonable. Maryland took a step backward on this measure last year, when it increased the period between renewal times for all drivers from five to eight years.

It's important those renewals be in person because, as AAA recommended at the Environmental Matters briefing, counter clerks can be trained in recognizing renewal applicants who may need

referral, a practice in place in Florida, Wisconsin and Hawaii.

Maryland has taken the solid step of strengthening the laws for young drivers, creating three tiers of licenses to transition from learners to provisional drivers, and finally to full drivers' licenses. Each has some solid provisions aimed at prevention of teen-driving accidents.

What we'd also like to see is a review program for younger drivers who are in an accident. Obviously, it wouldn't be for the same reasons older drivers face as they age, which are normally health related; young drivers' accidents are frequently caused by driver error or speed leading to loss of control.

But the program could be a matter of reviewing what led to the accident, and depending on its seriousness, formulating a corrective plan that leads to a round of renewed, rigorous retraining following a collision.