

Fatal crashes reignite debate over testing older drivers

Experts say older drivers are often safest drivers

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CONCORD, N.H. —Some fatal crashes in New Hampshire over the past year have reignited the debate over requiring older drivers to take road tests before renewing their driver's licenses. In September, state officials reported a 30 percent spike in highway deaths compared to 2011. One of the state's fatal accidents happened on Aug. 25 during a charity motorcycle ride in Westmoreland. About 200 motorcycles were traveling on Route 12 in Westmoreland when a car crossed over the center line and crashed into several of the motorcycles. Aaron Robar, 41, and Gary Champney, 59, were killed. "Some days, I just can't believe he's gone," said Robar's fiancée, Carleen Grasso. Robar left behind two daughters, his parents and two brothers. He was a well-loved high school football coach and commissioner for a local flag football league. The man who drove his car into the motorcycle ride was 87 years old, and police said he couldn't explain why he crossed the center line. The crash immediately triggered a passionate debate about elderly drivers. "Do I believe that they should test the elderly? Yes," Grasso said. "I know people who are old who should not be driving." After the crash, WMUR.com lit up with reader comments echoing similar opinions. One said, "Why this state doesn't implement mandatory annual driver's license inspections for those past the age of, say, 70 years of age astounds me." Some lawmakers disagree. "If road tests have any value, which I don't think they do, we ought to be doing it for a different age group than people 75 and over," said Rep. Bob Williams, of Concord. New Hampshire had been road testing drivers 75 and up since 1963. But in 2011, Williams wrote and helped pass legislation that removed the age-based requirement from the law. "It's just outright discrimination," he said. "We are telling the safest drivers in the state and in the country that they have to take a road test." According to AAA, drivers who are 75 and older have fatal-crash rates equivalent to drivers in their late 20s. Statistics show that drivers 85 and up have the highest rate of fatal-crash involvement of any age group, but experts said that's mostly because the drivers themselves die, not because they are killing others. "Older drivers are some of the safest drivers on the road," said AAA spokesman Pat Moody. "They are less likely to speed. They are more likely to buckle up. They are less likely to drink and drive." In the Westmoreland crash, the driver died from his injuries days after the crash. There were no major issues in his driving record. Illinois is the only state in the country to require road tests for drivers when they turn 75. Williams is pushing New Hampshire to follow the example set in Maryland of using medical advisory boards to screen all drivers for license worthiness. "All we need is a medical advisory board, which we worked on for seven years, and we have it now, and it would be a way of removing from the road drivers of all ages who should not be on the road," Williams said. The discussion about giving up the keys can be tough, and the AAA website offers free tools for seniors and their families to determine if it's time. It also has a feature where people can enter the medications they're taking to determine if side effects might impair driving. AARP sponsors a driving seminar for seniors at the Pelham Police Department. It's voluntary and involves no actual driving. It uses a workbook and discussion format that encourages self-evaluation. There are still efforts under way to reinstate annual road tests for aging drivers. State Rep. Tara Sad, of Walpole, is pushing for the change. "I think that maybe testing starting at 85 would be a logical thing and something that would protect the safety of other drivers in the state," Sad said. Some seniors agree that drivers should be evaluated in some way. Beverly Cunningham, of Windham, said she takes the driving seminar course every three years and supports testing for seniors. "I think you should be off the road if you're not capable," she said.

Grasso said she still struggles with losing her fiance. She said that the night before his death, they lost a close family friend who was struck on his motorcycle by an 18-year-old driver. She said she hopes drivers of all ages see the surge in fatal accidents as a wake-up call.