

How Old Is Too Old To Drive? WRAL Investigates Older Drivers

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SMITHFIELD, N.C. — How old is too old to drive? It is a debate that causes strong and sometimes heated emotions on both sides of the issue.

There is a living memorial outside the Murray home honoring a lost son. Nearly two years ago, a minivan slammed into a group of students at Smithfield Middle School killing Chris Murray's 11-year-old son, Byrone, and injuring six others.

The driver, Sara Bell Kennedy, told investigators she put the van in reverse and the next thing she knew people were pulling her out of the vehicle.

"I knew she would not have done anything to hurt anyone on purpose," Chris Murray said.

"I still would like her to know that I have an inner peace as far as she goes," Sheree Murray, Byrone's mother, said.

The district attorney ruled the deadly crash an act of "tragic negligence," but did not charge Kennedy. Now almost 87 years old, Kennedy still has an active North Carolina driver's license and continues to drive.

"I don't want to say anything about her having a driver's license," Chris Murray said.

When it comes to older drivers, the statistics are conflicting. According to statistics from the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration (NHTSA), drivers over 65 years of age are involved in the fewest number of crashes per licensed driver.

The organization's statistics also show older drivers drink and drive the least and wear seat belts the most. On the other hand, aside from teenagers, NHTSA statistics show older drivers have the highest rate of fatal crashes per mile driven. One reason is because they are more fragile and susceptible to injury. Another issue is deteriorating health. While many seniors are in good health, federal statistics estimate that close to half of people 85 and older have some form of dementia, typically caused by Alzheimer's disease.

People who are 85 years of age and older are also the fastest growing group of drivers.

"For those persons who may not be aware of their declining skills, they keep driving like they're 20 or 25 years old. Yet, they don't have the reflexes, the vision, those other things you need to be a safe driver," said Wayne Hurder of the state Division of Motor Vehicles.

Despite that, North Carolina tests 90-year-old drivers just like 30-year-olds.

"We tested a lady in Asheville who is 101 years old and she passed our test," Hurder said.

North Carolina stands in the middle of the road when it comes to restrictions on older drivers. Every five years, they must complete a vision and sign test to renew their licenses. Illinois requires renewals every two years after age 80 and every year for drivers 87 and older. On the other end of the spectrum in Tennessee, drivers 65 and older never have to renew again.

"You really shouldn't judge someone by their age. You should really look at their capacity and their capability," said Suzanne LaFollette of the AARP.

The AARP opposes any legislation to tighten renewal times and standards for seniors. Instead, the organization pushes the voluntary use of its 55 Alive program.

"We feel through the 55 Alive Driver Safety program, we're keeping an eye on that, and so we're helping those drivers maintain those skills," LaFollette said.

Pat Sprunt, 76, stays active and drives wherever she needs to go. She sees no point in more testing, but she feels everyone can benefit from 55 Alive.

"I don't think older drivers are that bad," Sprunt said. "It's good from 60 on to take this course to sharpen your knowledge about things you thought you knew all along."

Kennedy said she will always live with the grief. Despite the accident, she never lost her license. After a battery of tests, the state restricted her to only daytime driving and no interstates. Kennedy continues to drive around Smithfield for her church work and to run errands.

"It's up to them as an individual and as responsible family members to make those decisions," Chris Murray said.

The Murrays hold no ill will toward Kennedy, but, they do believe the tragedy should compel families to keep a close eye on older relatives and the state to take a hard look at stricter licensing standards for seniors.

"If they're going to do it for 16-year-olds, they should do it for the elderly as far as their true driving abilities," Chris Murray said.

Legislation that would have tightened the renewal time for older drivers in North Carolina was defeated in 1999. The DMV is awaiting the results of a comprehensive study on elderly drivers in Maryland before it makes any new recommendations. So what are some of the alternatives for those ready to give up driving?

The town of Cary has created a tax-subsidized transportation system designed for the elderly and disabled.

Health problems forced 81-year-old Mary Grosscope to stop driving last year, but friends and C-Tran help maintain her mobility.

"It's my only way of really getting out. Otherwise, I'd be stuck in that apartment," she said.

C-Tran will take you wherever you need to go in town for \$2 for a one-way trip. For \$4, you can go anywhere in the county.