

A high accident rate among older drivers in Maine has safety experts concerned

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AUBURN — It was June 29, and James and Edie Chouinard of Auburn were in Portland, driving south on 295 on their way to celebrate their 26th anniversary.

Suddenly they saw the flashing blue lights on Maine State Police Trooper Douglas Cropper's vehicle. The police cruiser was stopped across the lanes on the interstate.

“I told my wife, 'Slow the heck down!’” James said. She slammed on the brakes. Their Mercury Marquis fishtailed before coming to a screeching stop, missing the police car.

At the same time, an elderly man — driving toward them — crashed into the cruiser. The man, 88, was going the wrong way on the interstate.

James Chouinard, 53, said he never saw the driver who was headed toward them. “If it wasn't for that trooper, we'd be gone. We would have hit that guy going 65 mph.”

Instead, no one was injured. As the couple looked at the smashed vehicles operated by the elderly man and the trooper, “I started crying,” Edie Chouinard, 52, said. “We all would have died.”

Cropper put himself at risk to stop the driver, she said. “He is a hero.”

Cropper said he was on a routine traffic stop in Portland that afternoon when he got a call about the wrong-way driver. From where he was stopped, he could see cars pulling over on I-95, getting out of the way of the driver. The trooper raced onto the interstate to get ahead of the driver, passing cars with his siren blaring.

"I had to go pretty fast," Cropper said. "I was northbound in the southbound lane for about half the way" to get to the man.

After he stopped the wrong-way driver, he asked him, "Why didn't you take an exit?"

"What exit?" the man said to Cropper.

"Did you think about stopping?" Cropper asked.

The man gave no answer.

The man told police he was all done driving. The state police sent an adverse driving report to the Secretary of State's Office, recommending the man's license be reviewed. On Aug. 2 the state took away his license.

More accidents among the elderly

The majority of drivers 65 and up are good drivers, cautious and courteous, according to police. "They're part of the generation that has a lot more respect for others," Auburn police Chief Phil Crowell said.

But research shows older motorists are involved in a disproportionately high share of traffic deaths.

Nationally, drivers 65 and older account for 16 percent of all drivers and 8 percent of all miles driven, but account for 17 percent of all traffic fatalities in 2010, according to TRIP, a national transportation research group.

Maine has 189,000 licensed drivers 65 and older, about 20 percent of all drivers, according to the Maine Secretary of State's Office. However, 22 percent of fatal crashes in Maine involved drivers 65 and older in 2010, according to TRIP.

Maine Department of Transportation data show drivers over 65 also experience more crashes per mile driven than any age group except 16-year-old drivers.

Furthermore, the crashes are 1.7 times more likely to lead to serious injury or death than drivers age 25 to 65. The reasons for this, according to MDOT, include that older drivers have diminishing physical, sensory and cognitive capabilities, and they're usually more fragile.

Safety and transportation officials are aware of the statistics. In 2011 a Maine Strategic Highway Safety Plan recommended upgrading older driver screening by 2013 and making senior transportation more available. So far in Maine and the nation, however, systemic changes have not been implemented to improve safety among older drivers.

On July 17 at 2:45 p.m., a 90-year-old Auburn woman was driving on the Veterans Bridge from Auburn to Lewiston when she suddenly crossed the center line, crashing head-on into a vehicle

driven by a woman with three children. Authorities initially feared there would be fatalities; ultimately two adults and three children were treated at local hospitals.

The elderly driver told police she “did not know where she was” after getting gas at BJ’s. All she knew, she said, was “she needed to make two left turns in Lewiston to get her husband’s medications.”

Recent changes in traffic patterns leading onto the bridge, even if they’re “well signed,” can lead to confusion, especially among elderly drivers, Auburn police Chief Phil Crowell said.

In Maine, a growing challenge

With an aging generation of baby boomers reaching retirement age and a growing population of people 65 and older nationally, safety among older drivers is becoming a greater concern among health and safety officials.

Maine is now the oldest state in the nation, with a median age of 42.7, topping Florida, with a median age of 40.7, according to the U.S. Census.

“We’re living longer than ever before,” said Katherine Freund, president of the Independent Transportation Network of America, a nonprofit group started in Portland. ITN provides rides to seniors. Freund started the group after her little boy was struck and injured by an elderly driver.

Nationally, 10,000 baby boomers are turning 65 every day. That will continue for 18 years, she said. “That’s the wave everyone is talking about. People are outliving lots of systems,” including transportation.

But responding to the challenge of safety among elderly drivers has been tricky.

In Maine, the only additional requirement as drivers age is vision testing. Beginning at 62, vision is checked at every license renewal, which occurs every four years — instead of six — once a driver turns 65.

The only time road tests are given is when an individual’s doctor suggests it, or there’s an adverse report filed by police on the driver, Megan Sanborn, spokeswoman for the Secretary of State’s Office, said.

Some experts say change is needed, including road testing for license renewals for older drivers. But that has proved to be difficult politically. In the 1990s, Maine legislators considered road testing for older drivers.

“I went to the public hearing,” said Kathryn Pears, the former director of the Maine Chapter of Education and Public Policy for the Alzheimer's Association. “There were 200 seniors in there, all concerned with increased scrutiny.”

The proposal went down in flames. “We need to revisit the issue,” Pears said. To that end, a summit on the issue involving all stakeholders has been scheduled for November by the Secretary of State's Office.

Freund supports road testing for age 75 and up. She's 62 and plans to stop driving at 75. She'll get rides through the ITN service she created.

But proposing road exams would be a lightning rod for controversy, she added.

Another solution is expanding the services of a network like hers, providing rides that allow seniors to give up driving, she said. “People will do the right thing if they have choices,” Freund said.

On July 3 at 11:30 a.m., an 82-year-old Lisbon woman was turning around at Thorne's Corner Auto and Truck Repair on Sabattus Street in Lewiston when her vehicle slammed into a parked van, pushing the van into the building. The driver of the van was trapped until firefighters extricated her. Lewiston police said the Lisbon woman confused the brake and the gas.

How aging influences driving

Driving is a complex task. As we age, changes make driving riskier, experts say.

For most, the day will come when we should no longer drive. “It's only a question of when,” Freund said.

Changes brought on by aging — including slower reaction time and weakened vision — start to negatively influence driving ability as early as age 35, Freund said. Driver experience compensates until about age 75, when, for many, aging “overtakes the benefits of driver experience,” she said, noting that for many, driving especially worsens around 85.

Aging causes most motorists to change their driving patterns. “We stop driving at night because we can't see as well,” Freund said. “We stop driving on the interstate because it becomes difficult to merge into traffic. It becomes difficult to judge the speed and distance of oncoming vehicles.”

Sometimes older drivers come to a dead stop in merging lanes. “They're trying to be careful,” Freund said. “The same when turning left.”

Older drivers often avoid driving in inclement weather. "Raining weather is hard; they lose the ability to understand visual contrast," Freund said. Being able to divide attention among multiple events transpiring on the road also diminishes. "You see older people slow down so they can process it."

The aging process also means a reduction in physical abilities for things like turning your head to see if a lane is clear. Also, taking multiple medications, which is common among older citizens, can slow reaction time. These kinds of changes "happen to everybody," Freund said.

On top of that, there's dementia, added Pears, who works with families and police at her Dementia Care Strategies in Brunswick.

The majority of older drivers don't have dementia. At age 65, 13 percent have dementia; by age 85 the number rises to 45 percent, according to the Alzheimer's Association.

Pears said dementia is often responsible for things like confusing the gas and the brake, driving the wrong way on a highway and putting the vehicle in "drive" instead of "park." "It's related to confusion, visual and perceptual changes," she said. "Dementia causes damage in the brain. It changes how people react."

If most people were to get on the interstate headed the wrong way, "we wouldn't have to go too far to know something was wrong," Pears said. "We'd pull over and at least stop."

But people with dementia may not see vehicles around them. "I work with law enforcement officers who've said they've tried to stop an elderly driver," Pears said. "They had their sirens and lights blaring. The drivers said they weren't aware of the police car."

People with dementia often aren't aware they shouldn't be driving; it usually takes the intervention of family members, a doctor or police to convince them otherwise, she said

On Aug. 25 in Westmoreland, N.H., a vehicle driven by an 87-year-old man crossed the center line and drove into a procession of oncoming motorcyclists, killing two riders. The bikers who died were 59 and 41 years old. Five others were injured. The procession was part of the annual "Ride for the Fallen," honoring Army Spc. Justin Rollins, who was killed in Iraq in 2007. The elderly driver told police at the scene he couldn't explain why he turned and ran into the motorcycles. The man died from injuries a few days after the crash.

Time to give up the keys?

Anna Faucher, 92, of Lewiston gave up driving last year at age 91.

It wasn't because she was in an accident. "I wasn't comfortable driving," she said recently, as she played cribbage with Lewiston seniors at the Lewiston Memorial Armory. "I was afraid of getting in an accident."

She gets rides from her son. Her friend, Betty Ames, 77, also gives her rides to card games. When seniors should stop driving "is an individual thing," Ames said. "You can be 80 and do good." Others need to stop. "It depends."

Wrestling with when to stop driving "becomes a challenge for us and families," Auburn Chief Crowell said. "Driving is the last piece of independence an elderly person has to get groceries, go to the doctor's and visit friends."

Other than some city bus service, elderly transportation "is a huge unmet need" in Androscoggin, Oxford and Franklin counties, said Koriene Lowe, director of transportation for Community Concepts.

Police work with families, "especially after a bad crash," Crowell said. There have been times that the Auburn Police Department has written letters to the Secretary of State's Office "recommending this person's license be withdrawn. That's extreme," Crowell said. "We don't do it often."

His officers use their judgment, the chief said. "When we're investigating a crash, we're pulling that person's history." If there seems to be a lot of crashes lately, they'll begin investigating why and try to determine if the driver should stop. Often seniors give up driving themselves, Crowell said.

When police do write to the Secretary of State's Office suggesting a person's license be reviewed, they typically have the family's support, Crowell said.

"Sometimes we have family members who come in and say, 'Can you do it so we don't have to?' Sometimes it's near misses, not crashes, that brings up their concern," he said.

Like police, Pears meets with families worried that their aging friend or loved one may no longer be safe driving. Families are looking for help, she said.

It's a tough subject, Pears acknowledged, but noted that driving is a privilege, not a right.

One question Pears asks family members: "Would you let your grandchild ride with this person?" If someone hesitates for a second, you have your answer."

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Part one of a two-part series. [Tomorrow](#): Area seniors talk about why some of them stopped driving and whether additional tests should be given to drivers as they age. Plus, how to know when it's time to give up the keys, and how the Independent Transportation Network works.

Senior Driving Summit Nov. 2 in Augusta

Maine Secretary of State Charlie Summers is calling for a daylong "Senior Driving Summit" Nov. 2 at the Augusta Armory based on serious, high-profile crashes involving elderly drivers and research highlighting the correlation between aging and accidents.

The event will be sponsored by the Secretary of State's Office and AAA. The stakeholders — including seniors and family members, policy makers, law enforcement officials, physicians and care givers — will talk about the challenges of senior driving and the lack of transportation alternatives in much of Maine, said Secretary of State spokeswoman Megan Sanborn.

Changes in laws could come from the forum, but Summers isn't recommending any at this time, Sanborn said. On July 23, the Bangor Daily News reported that Summers was beginning an exploratory process that could lead to changes in driving laws in regard to elderly motorists, but Sanborn later said Summers is only calling for the summit.

Summers is the Republican candidate for the U.S. Senate seat held by Olympia Snowe. Independent Angus King and Democrat Cynthia Dill are also vying for the seat.

To register for the Senior Driving Summit on Nov. 2, call 780-6988 or email rhudon@nne.aaa.com. The forum will be held from 8:30 a.m. to 3 p.m. at the Augusta Armory on Western Avenue. There is no fee to attend; lunch is provided.

Source: <http://www.sunjournal.com/news/lewiston-auburn/2012/09/30/high-accident-rate-among-older-drivers-maine-has-s/1252255>