

Talking to older drivers about giving up the keys a difficult but necessary conversation, experts say

89-year-old June Withington of Santa Rosa navigates a roadway near her home, Friday, Nov. 16, 2012. When Withington turns 90, she will be retested on her driving skills by the DMV.

(Kent Porter / Press Democrat)

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June Withington can't imagine life without her Buick. Without her car, the 89-year-old Santa Rosa woman said she couldn't get to the doctor, church or to play bridge. Her son has offered to drive her, but the Kentucky-born Withington said she wouldn't want to impose. Nevertheless, her worry that maybe it's no longer safe to be on the road was underscored Thursday when she caused a minor fender bender as she was leaving her dentist's office.

Withington, whose husband died in 2010, said she's no longer comfortable having other people ride in her Buick with her.

"I wouldn't want to be responsible for anybody if I had an accident," she said.

Such calculations are played out daily across Sonoma County and the nation as the population ages. It can lead to a difficult choice for seniors and their families, one that often pits independence against the common good: When should someone give up their keys?

The topic is a delicate one to broach. Many family members and friends of older drivers struggle with ways to raise the subject of an individual's behind-the-wheel behavior without it being perceived as accusatory or demeaning.

But it's a conversation experts say needs to happen now more than ever. As evidence, they point to a series of tragedies in Sonoma County over the past three weeks, including crashes that claimed two lives and seriously injured a 13-year-old boy.

"A lot of people are in denial that they are going to have to change the way they do things," said Christina Clem, a spokeswoman for AARP in Sacramento.

In Sonoma County, there were 36,355 licensed drivers age 70 or older at the start of 2012. Of those, 1,678 were age 90 or older, according to the DMV.

Experts say age alone is not a good indicator of a person's driving fitness, hence resistance on the part of AARP and other advocacy groups in establishing an upper age limit for drivers.

"It would be unfair to tell a 72-year-old driver that they shouldn't be driving just because of their age, when all of their cognitive abilities are fine," Clem said.

Many remain confident of their skills. One study found 83 percent of respondents 65 and older have no plan for when they might eventually have to hang up the keys, she said.

Advocates implore older drivers and their loved ones to talk about the issue before it becomes a crisis.

“It's a huge life change and everybody needs to be involved to make it work,” said Dean Brittingham, transportation coordinator at the Sebastopol Area Senior Center.

Last week, Brittingham addressed about 30 people at a “Transition from Driving” seminar at the Bennett Valley Senior Center. The event, sponsored by the Sonoma County Area Agency on Aging, was the last in a series of seminars held at senior centers across Sonoma County this year to address concerns about older drivers.

Some participants were there because they wanted to assess whether it's time for them to stop driving. Others came hoping for tips on how to broach the subject with a loved one.

Withington attended the presentation along with her son, Richard, who drove that evening because his mother no longer drives at night.

“It's easy to talk about this because we care about one another,” he said. “Unless we do this, we're going to have challenges ahead.”

Rabon Saip, who spearheaded the driving program as a volunteer for the Agency on Aging, tried calming the nervous audience by telling them he understood the “depression, isolation and despondence” that a person might feel when they give up driving.

Saip, 77, felt those feelings himself after he stopped driving in 1984 because of degenerative eye disease.

“I was angry until I realized I was upset at myself and the world for no reason,” he said.

Several participants nodded their heads when a man on a video described feeling “like a prisoner in my own home” after he gave up driving. Others laughed when another man said, “people drive crazy these days.”

But seriousness crept back in when Saip recalled hearing the blare of sirens on Nov. 7 during a similar presentation at the Vintage House Senior Center in Sonoma. The sound was of emergency personnel rushing to the aid of 93-year-old Alvin Hesse, who lay mortally injured in a crosswalk, allegedly hit by a driver who was 80.

Hesse, a World War II veteran and longtime KRON-TV employee, was riding his motorized scooter across Fifth Street West in Sonoma when he was struck and killed. It was the second serious crash allegedly caused by an older driver on that street in a span of two weeks.

Also on Nov. 7, 88-year-old Evelyn Cunningham was struck after the Sonoma woman pulled her PT Cruiser out of the Santa Rosa Marketplace into the path of a van driven by a 79-year-old man. Cunningham died two days later as a result of her injuries.

Each of these tragedies renews the debate over the wisdom of some people continuing to drive even when their ability to do so is diminished. Most often, evidence of such problems builds slowly over time, with a scrape here or a dent there.

The presenters at Wednesday's seminar encouraged loved ones to discuss their concerns with an older person's driving in a nonjudgmental way. They advised having a series of chats, rather than a big family meeting, to help ease into the conversation.

“Compassion. Conversation. Mobility,” Brittingham said, to which she added, “driving should only be limited when we have valid safety concerns.”

Nobody pretended that giving up driving is an easy choice.

“All in all, I think it's one of the most frustrating things,” said Healdsburg resident Roland Hartsough, 84. “It seems every time I decide I need something, like maybe a certain-size bolt or a tool, I have to think, ‘How am I going to go get that?’”

Hartsough, who was not present at Wednesday's seminar, recently gave up driving because he has vision problems caused by cataracts and glaucoma. The former IBM worker said he finally

was convinced to do so after his wife, Lorraine, kept telling him that he was driving too close to the center divider.

“My wife would be telling me I'm too far from the curb, and I would think, ‘No, I can't be any closer to the cars at the curb,’” Hartsough said.

Hartsough said he uses cabs and a bus service in Healdsburg to get around. But neither is an adequate replacement for his Plymouth Colt Vista, which is parked in his garage so that his son can borrow it.

Occidental resident George Stephens, 89, said he would be “lost” if he couldn't drive and he said he has no plans to give it up.

“I couldn't go to my doctors. I probably would have to sell this little three acres here and move to a place that is easy on rent or has assisted living,” he said.

Likewise, Irene Bettendorff, who lives outside Sebastopol and is 87, said she has no plans of hanging up the keys.

“I'm very independent, let's put it that way,” she said.

Nationwide, drivers 75 and older kill fewer pedestrians, bicyclists, motorcyclists and occupants of other vehicles than do drivers ages 30 to 59, according to a study cited by the Insurance Institute for Highway Safety.

But drivers ages 75 and older have more insurance claims for damage to other vehicles per insured vehicle than drivers ages 35 to 69, the institute found.

Drivers over the age of 75 face an elevated risk of dying in a crash, but that risk mainly applies to themselves or their passengers. The most common error older drivers make is failing to yield the right-of-way, according to the insurance institute.

Crashes at intersections also are a problem, as evidenced by recent events in Sonoma.

On Oct. 27, a 92-year-old Sonoma driver struck two teenage boys as they were walking in a crosswalk on Fifth Street West in front of Sassarini Elementary School. One of the boys, 13-year-old Toby Ragueneau, suffered a skull fracture.

The driver, Levon Arkelian, denied striking the boys despite eyewitness accounts and damage to his car. The DMV suspended his license Nov. 3.

Less than two weeks later, on Nov. 7, an 80-year-old Boyes Hot Springs driver allegedly struck and killed Hesse as he traversed the Fifth Street West crosswalk on a motorized scooter. The driver, Joe Bick Kwai Lee, also denied striking anyone after Sonoma Police Chief Bret Sackett pulled him over.

“I asked for his license and registration, and said, ‘Is there any chance you might have been in an accident?’ He said, ‘No,’” Sackett recalled.

Lee, who was driving on a suspended driver's license, had been referred to the DMV in July for re-examination of his driving fitness.

Lee apparently failed to show up for that test, which resulted in his license being suspended July 28. It was re-suspended Oct. 16 after he failed a driver's test, a DMV representative said.

No state restricts older drivers based on age alone. Some states shorten the amount of time between license renewals after a person reaches a certain age. California is not among them, but does require drivers 70 and older to renew their licenses in person.

Anyone can also contact the DMV to request that a driver be re-examined. The DMV will only reveal the identity of the person making the request with a court order, a representative said.

Such action should be taken as a last resort, said Colleen Campbell, one of the presenters at this week's driving seminar in Santa Rosa.

“It's a harsh thing to do to someone,” she said.

Sonoma police have requested that the seminar be offered in the city again next year in light of the recent crashes there. Saip said an ongoing support group for people who are in the process of hanging up the keys also is planned countywide.

The Sonoma City Council on Monday will address pedestrian safety. The agenda item, which came at the request of Mayor Joanne Sanders, will include a discussion of Fifth Street West and whether more should be done to make the thoroughfare safer.

In 2006, at the same crosswalk where Hesse was killed, Anna Marie Simmons, 82, was struck and killed by a 47-year-old unlicensed driver. Another woman, Beatriz Villanueva, 51, died when she was struck there by a 78-year-old woman on Valentine's Day 1996.

“We have to make sure that there's nothing inherent about that area that has exacerbated what already was a problem,” Sanders said.

The city last year reconfigured the street to include adding a center turn lane and reducing north-south traffic to one lane each. But with bicycle and parking lanes on each side, it remains a wide street.

On Tuesday morning at the crosswalk where Hesse was killed, 36-year-old Eric Zarr pushed a button to activate lights and an audible warning that stated, “Cross street with caution. Vehicles may not stop.”

Zarr was halfway across the street when he jumped back suddenly to avoid being hit by a red sedan that blew through the crosswalk and kept going.

Behind the wheel was a gray-haired woman who will never know how close she came to disaster.

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