

When should you take keys from elderly drivers?

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Older drivers take an AARP course at The Renaissance Senior... (George Skene, Orlando Sentinel)

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By [Susan Jacobson](#), Orlando Sentinel

Angelo and Mary Virgona left their [Apopka](#) home for [Orlando](#) armed with a map, a GPS and a cellphone.

More than 30 hours later, 91-year-old Virgona and his wife, who is 88, pulled into a gas station 150 miles away, disoriented, hungry and tired.

Tollbooth cameras showed the couple had been driving back and forth on Florida's Turnpike in South Florida before they left the highway and veered west to LaBelle.

"We thought perhaps they had gotten carjacked — or something worse," said their son Robert Virgona, 59.

That June day, a reluctant Angelo Virgona joined thousands of Florida seniors who have given up their car keys.

It's a trend that experts say will accelerate as aging baby boomers swell the state's senior population from 18 percent to 27 percent by 2030 — the highest percentage of any state — challenging families, law officers and transportation planners.

"We know the [older] population is going to increase," said Gail Holley, manager of the Safe Mobility for Life program at the [Florida Department of Transportation](#). "What we're trying to do is not let the crashes increase."

One of the biggest dilemmas for drivers and their relatives is deciding when it's time to stop. Age isn't the only determining factor. Some 89-year-olds, such as Barbara Elrod of [Winter Park](#), have no trouble driving. Other people's abilities diminish decades earlier.

"If I wanted to come here and I couldn't drive, I'd be up the creek," Elrod said after an exercise class at the downtown Orlando YMCA.

As they age, most people develop [arthritis](#) — which can limit movement — are more likely to take medications that impair their driving ability, have slower reflexes and suffer more-severe injuries in crashes because they have more fragile bodies, according to [AAA](#).

Cecelia Figueras, 79, and her 81-year-old husband are facing some of these challenges. Roberto Figueras suffered a [heart attack](#) and a [stroke](#) last year and hasn't driven since. The Orlando retiree used to hop in the car every day to play dominoes at a bodega with friends and stop by Publix for a lottery ticket.

Roberto Figueras has held on to his drivers license, hoping to get behind the wheel again someday.

"He still hasn't accepted it," Cecelia Figueras said. "He's not happy about giving up his rights to drive because he's dependent on me and my granddaughter."

Talking to a loved one about diminished driving capabilities can be a wrenching experience, said Christine Carson, 67, a coordinator for the AARP driver-safety program in Orange County. Some seniors deny they're having trouble in spite of evidence to the contrary. For example, they may emphasize their perfect record of no tickets or crashes but fail to acknowledge that they've been getting lost.

Fran Carlin-Rogers, an Orlando consultant who specializes in transportation for seniors, said there's a difference between someone experiencing normal age-related changes and someone developing [dementia](#).

"Somebody who is having cognitive changes will typically overestimate their capabilities and underestimate the complexity of the situation they're in," Carlin-Rogers said. "It's just part of the disease."

AAA advises relatives to talk privately to the problem driver, avoid lecturing or making demands and work together on transportation alternatives. That can be difficult in Central Florida, where public transportation can be inaccessible or cumbersome; taxis are expensive and time-consuming; and urban sprawl makes driving a necessity in most places.

Carson suggests, "We love you, and that's the reason we don't want you killed or hurt — and we certainly don't want you to hurt someone else."

Driver strategies include staying off the roads at night and in the rain, when it's harder to see. Cecelia Figueras, for instance, said she avoids highways and heavily traveled streets and limits her destinations to familiar places near home.

Thirty-three states and Washington, D.C., have special requirements for older drivers. In Florida, people 80 and older must renew their licenses every six years instead of every eight, and a vision test is required.

When precautions fail, Florida's Silver Alert system sends out statewide alerts for missing drivers. They must be 60 or older and have dementia. Last week, the program turned 4 years old. It was established after Mary Zelter, 86, was killed when she drove into the [Intracoastal Waterway](#) while on the way to the supermarket from her assisted-living facility in Largo.

Recent Silver Alerts further illustrate the gravity of the problem.

A 79-year-old [Ormond Beach](#) woman last month drove into a pond near her apartment and drowned after she finished her shift at Walmart.

An 89-year-old [Casselberry](#) woman bound for a bridge game in a rainstorm in August drove into a retention pond in [Winter Springs](#) and drowned.

A 70-year-old Sanford woman went for a drive in July and was rescued three days later as she sat in her car in a water-filled ditch 25 miles west of Jacksonville.