

Dangers of older drivers

Our view: Maryland's aging driving population poses a serious safety risk that lawmakers in Annapolis appear reluctant to recognize

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If there is some good to arise from the tragic death of Nathan Krasnopoler — the 20-year-old Johns Hopkins University student killed while riding his bicycle on University Parkway by an 83-year-old driver who didn't notice him in the bike lane — it may be to call greater attention to the dangers of Maryland's aging driver population.

Today, Mr. Krasnopoler's parents were in Annapolis to brief the House Environmental Matters Committee on the latest data provided by the Maryland Motor Vehicle Administration documenting the threat. The number of Maryland drivers over age 70 is expected to double in just seven years and triple in 15 as baby boomers reach their geriatric years.

Turning 70 doesn't necessarily make a person a bad driver, but as a group, older drivers are more prone to cause car crashes — even as they drive less. Declining skills and vision, slower reaction time and potentially reduced mental acuity are all factors.

One of the MVA statistics that leaps out is that while younger drivers are involved in more crashes — peaking at age 25-34 — the proportion of drivers who are at fault in crashes turns sharply upward after age 55. Indeed, licensed drivers age 80 or over are as likely as teens to be at fault in accidents.

Yet while Maryland has done much in recent years to address teen drivers, including restrictions on driving hours and passengers, little has been done about senior drivers. Under current rules, older drivers whose abilities are in doubt can be referred to the MVA's medical advisory board (by a police officer, physician, court or family member) for evaluation.

But such a process is most often triggered by a crash or by a family member's decision to confront a driver of failing ability. Not all families are willing or able to do that. And waiting for an accident is a potential disaster in the making.

What many other states have done is to establish shorter renewal intervals for drivers' licenses past a certain age — typically, 70 or older. In Illinois, for instance, licenses must be renewed every two years beginning at 81. In Iowa, that requirements kicks in at 70. In Hawaii, 72.

That gives licensing authorities an opportunity to screen renewal applicants for potential problems. It's a policy that's been recommended to states, including Maryland, by the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration.

Unfortunately, Maryland has been going in the opposite direction. Last year, the General Assembly approved longer renewal periods (going from five to eight years) for all drivers. And since drivers only have to appear at an MVA office every other renewal, that means a 70-year-old approved for renewal may not have to appear in person again until age 86.

That 16-year gap is clearly a mistake, given the reality of crash statistics. Yet lawmakers resisted the idea of more frequent screenings of older drivers last year — and appear unlikely to take corrective action until the MVA's two-year study on older-driver safety is completed next year.

No doubt some lawmakers perceive such resistance as a principled stand against age discrimination (or perhaps a sop to older voters). But in reality, time catches up to everyone. The General Assembly's failure to tackle this issue now only puts more people, including drivers, passengers, pedestrians and bicyclists, in danger for the next 12 months.

What the Krasnopolers and others who support their nonprofit advocacy group, Americans for Older Driver Safety, would like to see is not only shortened driver license renewal periods for older drivers but more referrals to the medical advisory board and raised awareness of the problems of older drivers generally.