

# ★ ★ ★ ★ Senior Safety & Mobility

## Introduction

Contrary to conventional wisdom, older drivers as a group pose less risk to other road users than just about anyone. Older drivers are more likely to have functional limitations, or may require medications that negatively impact safe driving, and yet many recognize their limitations and self-regulate their driving. In 2005, people 65 and older accounted for about 15 percent of all licensed drivers in the United States but comprised only about 7 percent of all drivers involved in police-reported crashes. However, while seniors are involved in fewer crashes, their fatality rates are on par with those of teenagers, because older drivers are more likely to be seriously injured or killed in even a low- to moderate-severity crash.

Increasingly, Americans are becoming an older society. It is projected by 2025, people aged 65 and older will account for 25 percent of drivers, up from 15 percent in 2005. And, unless we, as a society, do something to further reduce the traffic risks facing these individuals, the number of traffic crashes will increase proportionately.

Seniors and their families face significant challenges in maintaining personal mobility, including determining whether they can improve their driving and thus their safety with an educational or training intervention, whether they have reached the end of their driving career, and—when they are unable to drive—how they can continue to be mobile. There is currently no uniformly accepted strategy for determining when and how to evaluate driving skills and abilities. Families are loathe to take the keys from aging parents or grandparents for a variety of reasons, including the impact lack of mobility has on a senior's mental health. But to improve safety for all members of society, there should be an acceptable system of screening, assessment, and interventions that respects the rights of seniors, the safety of other road users, and provides options when driving is no longer possible.

For more than two decades, the AAA Foundation has been at the forefront in recognizing aging and mobility as a serious safety and health issue. In a leadership role, the Foundation has sponsored numerous studies on the impacts on driving ability of various physical and cognitive changes that occur with age, the causes of crashes involving older drivers, ways to safely extend the driving years where possible, and development of Supplemental Transportation Programs (STPs). STPs provide transportation options for seniors to get where they need to go, when family members or other forms of public transportation may not be able to provide necessary transportation services to meet the mobility needs of non-driving seniors. For example, the Foundation-developed website, [www.seniordrivers.org](http://www.seniordrivers.org), is a well-respected and frequently visited source of information for senior drivers and their families.

Seniors face serious driving safety and mobility issues.



## **Proposal**

There is a clear need to do much more to ensure that an aging population can and does drive safely, and retains mobility options when driving is no longer possible, especially in light of the demographics. As noted earlier, if we cannot reduce the risks over the next two decades, this country will be facing an epidemic of crashes and related health impacts on older Americans. Under the auspices of the Center of Excellence on Senior Safety and Mobility, research will be undertaken on a wide range of issues including driver screening and assessment, driver licensing policies, driver training and rehabilitation, and mobility options for seniors who prefer not to drive or are no longer able to drive. Results will include tools and techniques to identify “at risk” drivers in a safe, efficient, and proactive manner, a better understanding of whether and how to extend safe driving for seniors, how to balance the needs for independent mobility with public safety, and how to continue to meet the mobility needs of seniors who have stopped driving.

In response to these pressing research needs, the Foundation convened an expert workshop in which top researchers, representatives from state licensing authorities, and senior safety advocates examined best practices, and developed a set of consensus-based recommendations for a model driver licensing system for older drivers. The group also identified additional research needed to achieve model systems. Those recommendations represent the fundamental basis of the proposed research under this proposal.

## **Core Activities**

The Center will perform research that shows how to most effectively implement multi-tiered driver licensing systems to screen, assess, and renew the driver licenses of aging drivers, rehabilitate drivers whose skills have diminished but who are still capable of driving safely, and meet the mobility needs of seniors who no longer drive. This is an extremely complex problem that demands tremendous political sensitivities. To bring this strategy to fruition requires additional research to:

- Develop publicly-acceptable and economically feasible screening policies and tools for identifying at-risk drivers that could be used by individuals, families, and care givers on a voluntary basis, as well as by licensing authorities.
- Pilot test these screening tools.
- Develop and validate more thorough methods to fully assess one’s functional fitness to drive on a case-by-case basis.
- Identify drivers whose fitness to drive could be improved through classroom and/or on-road training.
- Develop effective approaches for determining when, where, and under what conditions it is appropriate to grant drivers restricted licenses (e.g., restricting driving to daytime, close to home).
- Evaluate driver training/refreshers/rehabilitation programs that may extend safe driving years, and promote effective programs.
- Identify and support measures to increase the number of professionals who are capable of screening, assessing, and training older drivers.
- Continue work to expand the available options for seniors who can no longer safely drive.

Each of these steps will require substantial research efforts from researchers in diverse fields including traffic safety, ergonomics, geriatrics, public policy, psychology, and others.

Notwithstanding vast potential gains in safety made possible through better screening, assessment, and remediation programs, more and more older Americans will eventually reach a point when driving is no longer practical. Addressing these expanding mobility needs is a tremendous challenge for the transportation community and for all of society, and with some exceptions, most communities are not currently prepared to meet the challenges. A multi-faceted approach is needed, extending beyond traditional traffic safety research; it must include community planning, lifestyle changes, and the provision of STPs. Typically, STPs help to meet the requirements of that portion of adults who have special mobility needs not typically provided by public and paratransit services, including transportation escorts, door-through-door assistance, and transportation across the boundaries of existing transit systems. Although there are significant variations in how STPs are structured and operated, they are inherently more flexible than other local transportation options and are highly responsive to individual needs.

To meet these mobility needs and concerns, the Center will expand on the work already done by the Foundation to build and support STPs that benefit seniors in various communities. Additional information and collaboration is needed to encourage new service providers and to maximize the utility of existing ones. In addition, new resources, including a functional catalogue accessible by key stakeholders and the public, must be developed.

### **Strategic Communications and Public Education**

To disseminate research findings, the Center will employ a strategic communications and public education effort. Prevailing circumstances at the time of research completion will ultimately define the type and scope of outreach. Illustrative approaches may include:

- Developing a 'campaign kit' for community-based safety programs, medical professionals, and other community stakeholders to promote awareness of issues facing senior drivers, signs of skill deterioration, and effective countermeasures. The 'tool kit' may include indices or matrices for decision-making including evaluating physical fitness, cognitive impressions, understanding of risks and behavior, etc.
- Developing a set of tools for adult children of senior drivers on strategies and/or tactics to extend their 'safe driving' years.
- Developing one or more communications campaigns to advise seniors and their families on strategies and/or tactics to extend their 'safe driving' years.
- Providing the scientific basis for AAA and other senior safety and mobility proponents to advocate for fair, effective, and publicly acceptable driver licensing policies, systems and mobility solutions.
- Developing and updating a website that has a comprehensive list of organizations capable of screening and assessing drivers' abilities and a similar list of STPs.

'State of the art' marketing and communications strategies will be applied as "best practices" on an ongoing basis for the Center, and will include vital fundamentals such as release of regular press releases when research milestones occur, development and distribution of radio PSA scripts to enhance awareness of Center issues and impact on society at large, website development and content management, as well as site optimization for increasing traffic and visit duration and deployment of a strategic web marketing campaign to drive traffic to the website.

The media will be engaged through regular updates of an online media resource 'kit', and ongoing outreach to media will extend the reach and impact of all research projects. Sophisticated and unique message development will leverage research findings to enhance impact in the real world.

### **Outputs, Measurement and Evaluation**

Completed research will guide certain outputs and deliverables, including development of media communications and guidance to senior drivers and families on whether and how to extend driving years. In year three, the Center will have completed sufficient research to develop the above-noted components for the intervention 'tool kit'. It is anticipated that because of the scope and scale of the senior driver market, distribution of such a 'tool kit' will be supported through relationships with stakeholders and partners.

Once the 'tool kit' is in place, a communications campaign can be designed to support the information, delivery systems, and interventions recommended.

As research identifies valid screening strategies and tools to qualify senior drivers to continue driving safely, a database will be compiled to serve as a reference tool for community leaders, stakeholders, and senior drivers and their families. It is anticipated that this database can come online in year three or four.

The breadth of the STP program requires ongoing work to maintain and update content, as providers change. It is anticipated that the program will expand robustly through each of the initial four years, and will be updated and maintained thereafter.