



## **OLDER DRIVERS – OCCUPATIONAL THERAPISTS CAN HELP ASSESS RISK**

If you have volunteer drivers – or family members -- who might have age-related impairments that affect their ability to drive safely, consider an evaluation by an occupational therapist who has a specialty in driving-skills assessment. Not only might such an evaluation help avoid a serious accident, it also offers objectivity that volunteer managers or family members do not have – which can make it easier for the older person to make the appropriate decision about driving.

Carolyn Rosenblatt is a registered nurse, retired personal-injury attorney and author on aging-related issues. She notes that an elder might not be willing to listen to family members who say it is time to give up the keys. “But the elder might be persuaded to get a driving evaluation by an objective person, just to ‘prove I’m fine.’ That also takes the onus off the doctor, who may be reluctant to say an aging patient should stop driving when the doctor and patient have had a long relationship and the doctor has never witnessed the elder’s driving.”

The [American Occupational Therapy Association](#) and the [Association For Driver Rehabilitation Specialists](#) can help you find members near you who have been trained to recognize the impact of aging, overall health, disabilities and various risk factors on one’s ability to drive. They can make clinical assessments of vision; the ability to recognize and respond to situations quickly; strength; flexibility; and knowledge of traffic rules. A complete assessment also will include a behind-the-wheel test, either in a vehicle or a simulator. The specialist will explain the results of the evaluation, provide a written copy, and make recommendations that might include retraining, rehabilitation, adaptive equipment for the vehicle, or other measures that can help the driver operate his or her vehicle more safely. In some cases, the recommendation could be to stop driving entirely.

The process usually takes 2-3 hours, at a usual cost of \$350-\$700, depending on the kinds of tests conducted. Insurance, veterans’ benefits, and discounts sometimes apply. If the evaluation is done at a doctor’s referral, the doctor might be notified of the results.

### **Use your clues**

Fender benders, near-collisions, confusion in traffic and erratic driving are not the only signs that an older person might be near the end of his or her driving life. Dr. Anne Dickerson, occupational therapy professor at East Carolina University, says volunteer managers should take note of other information that might become available: “When a volunteer driver starts to have difficulties (maybe remarks that

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a son or daughter has taken over this task) with other instrumental activities of daily living like budgeting, medication management, finances, or learning new methods of doing something, I would say it is time to retire from driving other individuals. The driver may reassure the organization that driving is something they can do very well, but (delegating other tasks) just demonstrates the slowing of information processing – which will impact driving.”

Elders and most others love their independence. But the risk that someone cannot safely control a heavy machine traveling at high speed demands that his or her family, or volunteer manager, take reasonable steps to address that risk. As Carolyn Rosenblatt puts it, “The safety of our loved ones, as well as everyone else on the road, needs to be a priority that overcomes the discomfort of talking about it. We can all take responsibility for this problem that grows ever larger as our population ages in greater numbers than ever before.”