

Ohio's Multidisciplinary Approach to Improving Safety for Aging Citizens: **Learning from Occupational Therapists**

BY MICHELLE BIRDSALL, ELIN SCHOLD DAVIS, OTR/L, CDRS, FAOTA, AND MICHELLE MAY

The older driver population is increasing in the United States and will represent a significant portion of the population within the next 15 years. People age 65 or older represent the fastest-growing segment of drivers, and national projections suggest that a quarter of the driving population will be over the age of 65 by 2025.¹



The State of Ohio has been paying close attention to these demographic projections as the Ohio Department of Transportation (ODOT) also began recognizing an increase in fatal and serious injury crashes involving older drivers. Last year, approximately 23 percent of all traffic deaths in Ohio involved a driver over the age of 65. A decade ago, the percentage was 16 percent. The Scripps Gerontology Center at Miami University estimates that the population over 60 years of age will represent more than 28 percent of the Ohio statewide population by 2030, exceeding the national average of 25 percent.² Moreover, older populations in Ohio are concentrated in some counties with some projected to exceed 50 percent by 2030.

This information, coupled with data showing per capita crash rates are higher in rural counties and older driver crashes have a higher rate of serious injuries and fatalities, became a call to action for ODOT to implement new strategies to address safety and mobility for Ohio's aging population. Michelle May, the program manager of the Ohio Department of Transportation (ODOT) Highway Safety Program, explains that in 2016 ODOT and its safety partners launched an action team to examine the issue and make recommendations on how they could reduce traffic crashes involving older drivers, cyclists, and pedestrians. Recognizing the need to analyze the problem and incorporate different perspectives for a truly multidisciplinary approach, the Statewide Action Team included representation from key organizations, such as the Ohio Department of Aging, Ohio Department of Health, AARP, AAA, the Highway Patrol, and local transportation planning and transit agencies.

May explained that occupational therapists are our leading experts on aging, and the team needed to engage them in order to help determine designs that could help protect the aging driving population. As a result, May brought in Elin Schold Davis, a senior mobility expert who is a licensed occupational therapist and certified driving rehabilitation specialist, as a national expert to help inform the team's process to develop a better action plan.

Davis has led the American Occupational Therapy Association's (AOTA) Older Driver Initiative since 2003, which receives contracted funding from the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration (NHTSA). Generally, occupational therapists and occupational therapy assistants work with clients across the lifespan to participate in the things they want and need to do despite physical and cognitive challenges. With older adults, for example, an occupational therapy practitioner might work on dressing, bathing, and cooking skills. While all occupational therapy practitioners can address driving, occupational therapists certified in driving can evaluate driving ability and make suggestions to improve safety and comfortability. While the initiative was initially focused on driving evaluation, Davis described how the messaging has evolved to a much broader social opportunity to address older



OHIO DEPARTMENT OF TRANSPORTATION

Elin Schold Davis, a senior mobility expert and a licensed occupational therapist and certified driving rehabilitation specialist, presenting on supporting Ohio's aging drivers during a Toward Zero Deaths Safety Network meeting in Ohio.

driver safety through planning, education, and testing as indicated. She has participated in various state efforts to address senior mobility issues. The goal, she explains, is to help our communities accommodate an aging population. Davis explained that while she also has the privilege of working with other states on this issue, Ohio is one of the most proactive states in addressing the "opportunities" associated with an aging driving population.

Ohio has embraced a multidisciplinary approach to forming its safety plan. In examining the safety needs of a large, aging population, the team needed to better understand how older adults affect traffic safety, with the goal of forming recommendations to reduce crashes, not only for older drivers but also older pedestrians and bicyclists. May states, "There is all this amazing knowledge we can tap into as transportation professionals. I'm definitely learning a lot from occupational therapists and others on the team about the language, the research, and the different roles that people play in caring for and serving older adults. It's changed the way I've approached my role in traffic safety, and the way I think about aging in my family and myself."

While Davis explains she is a neutral party looking at the health care aspects of an aging population, the team benefits from her perspective of looking at the individual person and highlighting several areas to examine with older drivers. For example, she states that changes in driving ability are inherently associated with aging, and that change affects every one of us as we age. It can be harder to read small signs as we age, so if transportation professionals make sign lettering larger as a universal design change, everyone will read them better. Davis looks at the challenges from a person-centered

view, and sharing that is helping transportation professionals like May think differently about how to use highway safety funds to make roads safer for all users, such as through bigger, more reflective signs and pavement markings.

Aging is Not a Medical Condition!

Driving is important to the well-being of many older adults. It's often a primary mode of transportation, and it has a strong link to physical and mental health. There are a range of options available to help older adults continue to drive safely that do not necessarily involve giving up the keys. There is also a distinction that we need to make between normal aging and medical conditions. Normal aging includes gradual changes in vision, physical, and mental abilities that can affect driving ability. But there are lots of tools that can help drivers assess their ability and develop strategies to improve their driving. Medical conditions such as diabetes, strokes, and dementia significantly affect safe driving and require medical assistance and responses.

Suspending someone's driver's license even when clearly indicated may still be harmful to that person in its own way, the loss of transportation cutting them off from socialization and being able to access basic needs. As a result, we need to use the right tools and involve the right people in evaluating and responding to a person's fitness for safe driving.

One of May's biggest lessons learned from Davis is that when it comes to assessing at-risk drivers, professionals have to ensure they are using the right tools and involving the right people at the right time. It's also important to look at a broad range of options to help seniors continue driving, as long as they can do it safely. There is a difference between a driving test and a medical driving evaluation in determining a person's ability to drive. For example, referring an older adult with Parkinson's Disease to a driver examination station may not be as effective as referring them to an occupational therapist. The occupational therapist will have a much greater understanding of how the medical condition can affect safe driving than a one-time skills test of driving that day.

Davis finds that in approaching the issue of aging drivers since 2003, the biggest change we have seen is the movement from a focus on assessment alone to now making assessment just one piece of a bigger plan. That bigger plan includes the inclusion of options to address impairments in an effort to retain the license to offering aging drivers other transportation options. Most people are reluctant to give up driving because they fear that the loss of their license will leave them stranded. But if a citizen knows that the state has available and accessible options for them to get around, it leads to a different mindset. In that scenario, the state is not addressing safety by simply taking away, but rather through a supportive message to maintain mobility by accessing other options. May believes there is a way that engineers and the transportation

community can get involved in supporting more effective transit and ridesharing, stating, "we want to create communities where people are happy to give up their cars when needed, because there are good, affordable options."

Next Steps for the Ohio Statewide Implementation Team

Since learning more about the challenges of older driver safety and how to address them, Ohio's Statewide Action Team has outlined recommendations for engineers, planners, and educators/community outreach teams. A smaller committee has morphed into the implementation team that is now prioritizing these strategies and action steps for potential funding and investment. The committee is focused on four key areas: Education, Licensing, Infrastructure, and Alternative Transportation.

Education

In 2018, the implementation team wants to develop and market materials that help older drivers, caregivers, law enforcement, engineers, and others assess the impact of aging on safe driving. The team also wants to sponsor educational forums and events.

Licensing

The implementation team plans to review national best practices for assessing and licensing older drivers. It will examine what changes need to be made as a state to effectively assess older drivers who have been identified as a safety concern. The goal is to make that process fair and effective.



The Toward Zero Deaths Safety Network meetings such as this one are an opportunity to build relationships between the various disciplines involved in traffic safety and health care; foster professional development by featuring nationally recognized speakers on topics related to traffic safety; and recognize outstanding work by safety professionals across Ohio.

Infrastructure

The implementation team will examine if they can promote engineering designs that improve safety for older drivers (such as bigger, more reflective signing, wider and brighter pavement markings, etc.) Engineers have an opportunity to work with community planners, area aging organizations, and occupational therapy practitioners to conduct roadway or walk audits in communities with high concentrations of older adults. These interactions can help build professional relationships that can lead to safer roads and better community designs that help older adults remain mobile and connected to society through life.

Alternative Transportation

The implementation team will explore how engineers can also support effective transit and ride sharing in their communities.

Learn More

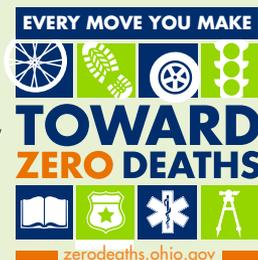
Above all, May emphasizes that the overarching goal in 2018 is on raising awareness and getting more people interested and engaged in the issue of aging driver safety. Her partnership with Davis, which is introducing more transportation professionals to the topic and the resources available across disciplines through forums and events, is a prime example of this effort in action. To learn more, visit the websites in listed the resources box. [itej](#)

For More Information

Ohio Department of Transportation Strategic Highway Safety Plan

zerodeaths.ohio.gov

The goal of Ohio's Strategic Highway Safety Plan is to achieve zero deaths on Ohio's roadways. The Plan is a map to guide professionals and volunteers who work tirelessly to help achieve this goal.



CHORUS

www.roadsafeseniors.org

The Clearinghouse for Older Road User Safety (CHORUS) is the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration's new go-to resource for all things related to senior safety and mobility.

American Occupational Therapy Association (AOTA)

www.aota.org/odsaw

Professionals can also contact Elin Schold Davis at escholddavis@aota.org.

resources



References

1. United States Census Bureau. "An Aging Nation: The Older Population in the United States." www.census.gov/prod/2014pubs/p25-1140.pdf. Accessed February 12, 2018.
2. Scripts Gerontology Center, Miami University. "Ohio Population Research." <http://miamioh.edu/cas/academics/centers/scripps/research/ohio-population-research/index.html>. Accessed February 12, 2018.



Michelle Birdsall is senior editor and writer of ITE Journal. Her previous roles have included senior editor and writer of NASA Spinoff magazine and communications director/project manager for the Department of Homeland Security Office of the Chief Information Officer. She is a graduate of LeadershipITE and has been an ITE staff member for 12 years.



Elin Schold Davis, OTR/L, CDRS, FAOTA is a senior mobility expert and a licensed occupational therapist and certified driving rehabilitation specialist. She leads the American Occupational Therapy Association's (AOTA) Older Driver Initiative, that works with occupational therapy programs and their stakeholders to serve senior drivers and their caregivers. Through this work they assess the risks and develop strategies to help individuals remain independent and mobile for as long as it is safe to do so. In addition, Davis manages senior mobility projects funded by the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration, and is AOTA's administrator of the CarFit collaboration with AAA and AARP.



Michelle May has been a member of the Ohio Department of Transportation (ODOT) for more than 29 years, serving in communication and program management roles. For the past 10 years, May has managed ODOT's \$102 million Highway Safety Program, which provides technical expertise and funding to state and local governments to improve high-crash and severe-crash roads. She also manages Ohio's Strategic Highway Safety Plan, which is a multidiscipline, multi-agency effort to prevent traffic deaths and serious injuries on Ohio roads.