Fatal crashes involving senior drivers renew debate over licensing, testing requirements

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Drivers age 80 and older in Florida don't have to take a driving test when they renew their licenses. But should they?

Two fatal accidents over the weekend may re-ignite the debate over whether the state should require older drivers to be retested and recertified in order to continue driving.

A 78-year-old woman was killed Sunday when she was backed into and run over by an 89-year-old driver at a Delray Beach Walmart. In Deerfield Beach, a woman was backed over and dragged across a church lawn by an 88-year-old driver.

Florida consistently has high rates of senior crash deaths, mainly because it has a lot of seniors. State statistics show that 442 crash fatalities of all ages involved drivers age 65 and older in 2010, or about 15 percent of all fatal crashes.

Public outrage — and the "when is someone too old to drive" debate — usually kicks up whenever there is a dramatic fatal accident involving a very elderly driver. Texas, which now requires in-person renewals once someone reaches his or her 79th birthday, revamped laws after a 90-year-old Dallas woman driving recklessly hit and killed a teenager on her way to school.

But safety experts say there's no solid proof that age-based driver regulations do much good.

Anne McCartt, senior vice president for research at the Insurance Institute for Highway Safety, said one recent study suggested that requiring older seniors to renew licenses in person might cut accident rates. "But with a lot of other things, including eye tests, there is mixed evidence as to whether these measures reduce crashes," McCartt said.

In 2010, the most recent year for which statistics are available, drivers 80 and older in Florida had crash rates lower than drivers aged 15 to 34.

Data is particularly sketchy on whether road testing predicts which seniors will crash. Only Illinois now requires it. Nine other states have seniors renew in person, beginning from 69 to 75 years old. Seventeen states have no age-based licensing requirements.

As the huge Baby boomer population heads into its 60s, McCartt said, the hunt is on for a screening tool that would be accurate, easy to administer and affordable.
"The reality is that driving tests are expensive," she said.

One of every five drivers in the Sunshine State is 65 or older, a ratio that will continue to increase as the Baby boomers age, state safety experts say. Florida has 2.75 million drivers in that age category, the second-highest in the nation. California is first, with 3.1 million drivers age 65-plus.

AARP, the huge national lobbying organization for retirees, opposes any testing standard based on age alone.

In 2004, Florida joined the 40 states already requiring vision tests for older drivers. Floridians 80 and older must pass a visual-acuity exam upon each renewal, a maximum of six years. Previously they could renew by mail for up to 18 years without a vision test.

Instead, AARP suggests promoting the state's medical-review program, which allows physicians, police officers and even the public to report risky drivers or those diagnosed with serious illnesses. State licensing inspectors then decide whether a road test is needed.

"There is no straightforward way to identify people who are likely to cause a crash and who is at risk," said AARP spokeswoman Nancy Thompson. "We would support regular, in-person renewal to identify people who shouldn't be driving."

In the Delray Beach accident, Anita Lobel, who lived in the nearby Polo Club of Boca Raton, was walking out of the store, 16205 S. Military Trail, Sunday afternoon after returning an item, when a Mercury sedan backed up over her, her son and authorities said.

The driver was 89-year-old Mary Goldberg of Delray Beach, according to Delray Beach police.

Evan Lobel, of Westchester, N.Y., said police called him around 4 p.m. about his mother's accident.

"It concerns me that older folks are driving when they shouldn't be on the road," he said Monday morning.

Goldberg is not facing criminal charges at this time, Delray Beach Police Sgt. Nicole Guerriero said.

Earlier on Sunday, Luciana Porto, 66, of Deerfield Beach, was killed by fellow parishioner Mary Szczepanski, 88, who backed her car onto the sidewalk.

Both women were parishioners at St. Ambrose Catholic Church, 353 SE 12th Ave., where mass was just letting out around 10:30 a.m. when the crash took place. Porto was walking on the sidewalk when Szczepanski backed into her with her Buick Century, then continued across the church lawn, dragging Porto beneath the vehicle.

State Rep. Irv Slosberg, D-Boca Raton, who sponsored the House bill that lead to the vision-test requirement for seniors 80 and older, said his focus now is on teen drivers, not seniors.

"It's the teenagers that are the real problem on the roads today," he said. "It's not the seniors who are texting and driving. It's not the seniors who are speeding and disobeying traffic laws."
Statistics show that the vast majority of seniors are capable drivers and have the lowest crash rates. But getting reliable crash data for older drivers is tricky, as they tend to drive fewer miles than younger motorists and travel more on city streets than highways, according to the insurance institute.

Generally, per-miles-driven crash numbers start increasing when drivers turn 70 and go up dramatically after they pass 80, institute researchers said.

The Louis and Anne Green Memory and Wellness Center at Florida Atlantic University does voluntary driver evaluations on about 12 seniors a week – a mix of people who want their skills evaluated or have been referred by concerned relatives of physicians.

The process, which takes about two hours plus follow up visits, requires several screenings by healthcare professionals plus a road test in order to get a clear picture of the driver’s abilities, center director Kathleen Valentine said.

While there is a link between getting older and health problems that can impair drivers, Valentine said there’s no set age when someone should turn over the keys. Her program encourages physicians to talk to their older patients about driving risks and evaluate each case individually.

"I know people think it would be convenient to just have an age cut-off, but it doesn't work that way," Valentine said.

*Staff writer Alexia Campbell contributed to this report.*