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Street smarts

UF program evaluates skills of elderly drivers



Desiree Lanford, a driver rehabilitation coordinator with the University of Florida, demonstrates an attachment designed to help drivers who need assistance to operate the gas and brake pedals.
JANNET WALSH/STAR-BANNER

BY MABEL PEREZ
THE STAR-BANNER

OCALA - Older drivers can now cruise over to a research center for tests that will evaluate their skills and help the government meet to their needs.

In hopes of collecting data for government agencies, researchers and therapists from the University of Florida founded the National Older Driver Research and Training Center. Under that umbrella lies the program Independence Drive.

Independence Drive conducts comprehensive driving evaluations that look at cognitive, sensory and motor function in older drivers in Ocala and Gainesville.

More than a handful of seniors have participated in studies. Others were attracted to the center because they wanted to boost their confidence.

"As an older driver, I'm very much aware my reactions are slower than what they used to be . . . I'm fully aware of my skill level," said Pricilla Milliman, 75.

The Gainesville resident signed up for an evaluation because she knew there were aspects of her driving that weren't the best. Her children, who all live in other states, had begun to get worried about her driving.

"I felt that if I took this battery of tests I would have a good idea of what my abilities are and under what situations I can drive in," Milliman said.

The battery of tests are geared toward identifying problem areas for older drivers.

"Every individual is unique," said Desiree Lanford, driver rehabilitation coordinator. "I look at every person holistically . . . I look at their strengths and weaknesses."

Driving evaluations and data are being collected for several studies. The Centers for Disease Control, the Federal Highway Administration and the National Highway Traffic and Safety Institute each asked UF to look at different areas that affect elderly drivers.

Studies for the CDC will determine the effectiveness of particular tests in determining driving abilities. The FHA is looking at road design. The NHTSA wants researchers to

determine whether guidelines they issued for physicians are valid in trying to pinpoint problem drivers. They are also looking at ways to improve behind-the-wheel training.

"This is extremely important work," said Dennis McCarthy, co-director of the research center.

Sometimes inability to drive leads to premature nursing home admission.

"(Our goal is) to allow elders to remain independent whether they drive or not. If you don't have an alternative you are going to be forced to drive," McCarthy said.

With a rapidly growing number of people over 65, Congress set money aside to study driving. In 2003, there were 35.9 million people 65 and older. Florida ranks second after California with 2.9 million seniors. The number of seniors over 65 is expected to double by 2030.

Members of the research team include engineers, occupational therapists, psychologists and computer scientists. The goal is to make road design more "elder friendly." If clients have problem areas, there is special equipment they can add to their steering wheels, mirrors and seats.

Lanford analyzes several tests at Independence Drive. Vision tests analyze peripheral vision, depth perception and sight. Cognitive tests look at a person's ability to recognize patterns, see changes in the environment and react to them. An hour-long road test takes drivers through the State Road 200 corridor, Interstate 75 and residential neighborhoods.

In all, drivers spend about three hours with an Lanford, an occupational therapist.

Some may fear that they may lose their license.

"It's difficult for me to tell them to retire from driving . . . But I'm a health-care professional and that's what I have to do. I'm here to tell them the truth not my opinion," Lanford said.

However, she adds, the unique quality that the senior community has is that they usually know their weaknesses and adjust to them. Sometimes her recommendations are as easy as sending her clients to an eye care specialist or neurologist.

Other times she suggests limiting driving to daylight hours a couple of days a week.

"I'd be nice if people saw this as a check-up. . .," Lanford said. "This is comprehensive. I look at the whole person. I look at where they drive and how much they drive. I can provide a lot of information to them. I give them feedback."

In Milliman's evaluation, her problem areas included moderate stiffness in the neck and difficulty scanning traffic areas. Her recommendations included getting an adaptive mirror, seeing an eye care specialist and keeping more distance in between her car and others at traffic stops or standstills.

"I just think that as older people we have to recognize that our skills aren't as good as they used to be," she said. ". . . We're fooling ourselves when we think we're being discriminated against when they want to check our eyes or give us a driving test."

Driving evaluations costs \$225. Driving training cost \$95. However, there is monetary compensation if older drivers participate in the research.

For more information call (888) 248-5005; the Gainesville office at (352) 392-8850; and Ocala at (352) 629-3015.

You can also visit <http://independencedrive.php.ufl.edu/>.

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