



Sunday, February 26, 2012

Calif. seniors may be at risk on the road, study says

Defensive driving courses offered in Auburn

By Sara Seyyidin Journal Staff Writer



Local seniors are reacting to a study that found California ranks third in the nation for the number of seniors killed or involved in deaths in traffic accidents.

"The first thing that comes to mind is with the amount of traffic we have in California it requires a lot of multitasking, or considering a lot of variables that are going on with traffic," said Rod Gross, an instructor for the AARP Defensive Driving Course. "That is one of the areas seniors have the most trouble with. Their mental processing slows down. The biggest thing is increase the following distance between the cars that seniors are driving and the car in front of them."

Some local seniors say it may be necessary to start local campaigns to check people's driving skills as they age, while others say the study's findings are a reflection of how much of a hurry most people are in.

Robert Ludgate, of Colfax, is a retired truck driver. He said when he reaches the point where he isn't a

safe driver anymore it will probably become apparent through other drivers' reactions.

"As far as the driving, I'm more cautious at night than I used to be. The light on the highway sometimes

affects my reaction speed," Ludgate said. "I think as you get older the public will let you know by way of signs, horns and fingers."

The study, conducted by TRIP, a national transportation research group, found that California has the highest number of licensed drivers over the age of 65 and only falls behind Florida and Texas in the number of fatal accidents in which seniors are involved.

Lungate said that may be because people are in more of a hurry compared to the past and tend to get frustrated by seniors who drive more cautiously.

"People today seem to be in hurry no matter where they are going. A lot of seniors are more cautious," Lungate said. "They tend to go slow and people get aggravated."

Sue Dunbar, 67, of Colfax, said she takes precautions to be a safe driver. Those include pulling over to use her cell phone and not texting. Even still,

she said a public program evaluating senior driving would be beneficial.

"I wish there was some avenue for older people who don't want for their children to tell them they shouldn't drive anymore," Dunbar said. "I wish there was a public program or ad posted for that."

While many seniors, like Dunbar say they are still safe drivers, she said others may benefit from not driving.

"It's not a bad thing to not drive anymore," Dunbar said. "There is a slogan I like, 'Stop driving, save a life.'"

Carole Richards, 70 of Auburn, and her husband Dick Phillips took a defensive driving course through AARP. She said the course was enlightening.

"The older we get the more of these little things we forget. We need to be more conscious, you know. We get into bad habits," Richards said. "It was eye-opening. It would probably be a good idea to take an actual physical driving class as well."

Richards said she would like to see the state implement mandatory driving tests for seniors every couple of years. With the state's budget constraints, she said it is unlikely, but could save lives.

"I have always felt that seniors, including myself should be tested every few years," Richards said. "Unfortunately, too often people don't stop driving when they should and then they are involved in an accident."

Reach Sara Seyyidin at saras@goldcountrymedia.com.