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Older drivers at risk

Study shows elderly have high crash, fatality rates

By HOLLY SETTER
Times Herald

Michigan roads can be treacherous for senior drivers, a recent report shows.

The study, released by TRIP -- a national transportation research group -- and the American Association of State Highway and Transportation Officials, shows Michigan ranks ninth in the nation for the number of fatal crashes involving a driver 65 or older. The state also claimed 10th place for the number of drivers 65 or older killed in crashes.

The numbers aren't any better for St. Clair County. Between 2006 and 2010, St. Clair County had 66 serious injury and fatal crashes involving drivers 70 and older -- the 10th highest total in the state.

In 2009, crashes involving drivers 65 and older made up 43.8% of all fatal accidents in the county with seven. The percentage fell to 26.1% in 2010 when the number of people killed in accidents involving a driver older than 65 dropped to six.

The statistics came as a shock to Fern Angerbrandt, an 86-year-old Clyde Township resident.

"I would have thought it would have been the 16- to 18-year-olds who would have a high rate," she said. "Most of my friends my age, I consider to be good drivers."

Angerbrandt might be right about her friends being good drivers.

Seniors might be among the drivers most likely to be involved in a fatal accident, but they were also among the safest drivers on the road in the county. In 2010, there were 950 crashes involving a driver older than 65; 1,511 for drivers 16 to 24 and 3,125 for drivers 24 to 64.

The discrepancy between the accident and fatality rates lies at Mother Nature's feet, said Kenneth Cummings, CEO of Tri-Hospital EMS.

"The plain reality of it is that seniors tend to have more fragile bodies," he said. "They don't sustain or tolerate impact on their bones like a younger person would."

Seniors also are more likely to have a pre-existing medical condition that might have caused the accident or complicated on-scene treatment, Cummings said.

"A 30-year old man isn't likely to have an extensive medical history, but a 75-year-old man might," he said. "On scene, it's not always easy to determine medical history. The driver could be unconscious or confused, but we need that information."

The best way to avoid injury is to avoid the accidents in the first place. Laura Newsome, director of the St. Clair County Council on Aging, said the council offers two intensive driver safety courses for seniors. The course runs for several days with instructive videos and a review of driving skills.

"The classes are fairly popular," she said. "We are not here to tell people that they shouldn't drive, but to help them appraise their own skills and stay independent."

The classes are not offered on a regular schedule; Newsome said they are scheduled when there is enough time to complete them or enough interest to pull one together.

Students in the classes represent seniors of all driving experience levels. Angerbrandt drove a school bus for Port Huron Area School District for 23 years before retiring; she took one of the driver's safety classes to make sure she was still on her game.

Heads up!
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SPORTS, 4B

Leap year
Student celebrates birthday on unusual day
LOCAL, 3A

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Fern Angerbrandt, 86, who took a class through the Council on Aging to keep her driving skills sharp, drives her car on Tuesday. (Holly Setter/Times Herald)

Senior statistics
Percentage of car crashes by driver age group

15-24%	15.2%	15.2%	17.7%	17.8%	18.3%	20.0%	19.9%
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Welcome Center lacks funding

By HOLLY SETTER

The state will not be collecting the toll money for the welcome center near the Port Huron area.

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Construction workers are building the welcome center near the Port Huron area.

Clerk 'satisfied' with Tuesday's voter turnout

By HOLLY SETTER

St. Clair County voters showed a strong turnout for Tuesday's primary election.

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Angerbrandt said changing traffic laws and norms can make navigating the roadways overwhelming for some seniors.

"When you're not really sure what you're doing sometimes, with the new rules and new laws, it can be intimidating," she said. "Even the way other people drive -- you have to duck and dive around traffic."

She added when she took the class, the instructors reviewed several ways to handle icy roads and other adverse driving conditions.

"I thought the whole class was great," she said. "I might even take it again."

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