

NJ ranks 6th for fatal crashes involving senior driver, report says

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New Jersey ranks 10th among states with the highest number of drivers 65 and older, and sixth when it comes to the percentage of fatal crashes involving a senior driver, according to a national report released Wednesday that calls for more transportation dollars and driver education to keep seniors safe.

“We want to make sure there is adequate funding available to make all the improvements that will keep older drivers safe,” said Carolyn Bonifas, spokeswoman for The Road Information Project, or TRIP, a Washington, D. C.-based non-profit. “It’s important that they have a transportation system that keeps them mobile and keeps them safe,” she said.

Bonifas said 21 percent of the fatal crashes in 2010 involved an older driver. According to the New Jersey Motor Vehicles Commission, New Jersey has 818,320 drivers 65 or older.

The report lists various safety recommendations to benefit senior drivers, including clearer, simpler signs with large letters; bright street markings at intersections and extending the length of merge or exit lanes.

Joe Dee, spokesman for the New Jersey Department of Transportation, said the agency agrees with the report. He said New Jersey does have rumble strips along all of its interstate roadways and that more than 95 percent of the highway signs meet federal standards for brightness.

He said the state is working with the New Jersey Institute of Technology on a program to track the age and condition of signs.

The TRIP report also recommended that seniors take driver courses to update their skills.

Frank Conti, a volunteer instructor for the American Association of Retired Persons, AARP, of New Jersey, teaches classes to drivers 55 and older at a [Midland Park](#) senior center.

He said many of his mature students come because they get an insurance discount after completing the \$16-course that addresses driver distance between cars, speed and parking, among other lessons.

“When they first learned to drive, that might have been 50, 60, 70 years ago,” he said. “Roads have changed.”

He said his students gain a greater awareness of other drivers after taking the class.

The report also calls for public transportation options for seniors that are accessible to the disabled, and improvements to automobiles.

Other findings including the following:

- For those 65 and over, 90 percent of travel takes place in a private vehicle.
- Many older people regulate their driving as they age, including traveling only on familiar routes during daylight hours, avoiding left turns and sticking to less complex roads.
- The effects of injuries sustained in traffic crashes tend to be more severe in older drivers because of physical frailty and existing medical issues.
- As people age, their eyesight, reaction time, cognitive ability and muscle dexterity may deteriorate, making driving more difficult.
- Left-hand turns can be more problematic for older drivers, as they must make speed, distance and gap judgments to enter or cross the through roadway.

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