

# AMARILLO GLOBE-NEWS

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## Families key to monitoring older drivers' capabilities

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Older drivers in Texas must comply with more stringent rules, but authorities said their hands are mostly tied when seeking to ensure those motorists are capable of driving safely.

Families who best know their relatives' capabilities, in fact, are the most likely to spot at-risk drivers, Amarillo Police Sgt. Brent Barbee said.

"There's often some denial there because, let's face it, nobody wants to give up their ability to drive and have it interfere with their independence," Barbee said.

The dangers are real.

While police have not released an official cause for the accident, three older people were killed Wednesday in a crash. Police said a pickup driven in the wrong direction on South Lakeside Drive by Frank Eugene Basler, 88, of Amarillo, smashed head-on into a car carrying David Elmon Wiseman, 73, and his wife, Alice Jane Wiseman, 66, of Panhandle. Neither alcohol nor speed was a factor in the crash, police said.

Instances like that one are no rarity in Texas. The Lone Star State ranked No. 2 behind Florida in 2010 in the number of fatal crashes involving a driver 65 or older, according to a study released last month by **TRIP**, a nonprofit national transportation research group based in Washington.

Older drivers take care in deciding where and when to take to the roads, tending to stick to familiar and less complex routes and avoiding nighttime travel, the **TRIP** report said. Still, studies

show fatality rates steadily climb once drivers pass 65 and soar once drivers reach 85. Fatality rates for that group are four times higher than for teenagers, according to the Insurance Institute for Highway Safety, an Arlington, Va., nonprofit group that researches crashes.

And the ranks of older drivers are swelling as baby boomers enter their golden years. By 2025, one in five drivers will be 65 or older, according to the **TRIP** study.

But that report — along with Barbee and transportation experts — makes an important point: Older Americans prize their independence, represented in part by their ability to drive. And perceptions about the hazards posed by older drivers don't always match the reality.

"Elderly drivers are often demonized as a big risk to others on the road, but in fact, the statistics don't bear that out," said Russ Rader, a spokesman for the Insurance Institute for Highway Safety. "They're more of a risk to themselves because they are more likely to be seriously injured or killed because of their fragility."

Nationwide, 29 states have additional license regulations for older drivers, a category that typically begins at age 65, the highway safety institute said.

The most popular state measures include more frequent renewal dates and vision tests, according to the institute's website.

Texas law requires drivers older than 85 to renew their licenses every two years, instead of the regular six-year term for younger motorists.

Texas drivers older than 79 also are barred from renewing their licenses through the mail or electronically.

Nonetheless, it's not clear the tighter measures help, Rader said.

"The research is mixed on whether special requirements or screening tests reduce crash rates for older drivers," he said.

Organizations such as AARP and AAA provide safety courses and offer online tips for drivers and their families to assess driving abilities.

The Amarillo Police Department offers no programs aimed at educating older drivers and their families.

"Some people are unaware that they have vision problems or hearing problems or coordination problems that cause them to be dangerous drivers," Barbee said. "If they don't realize it themselves, then it makes it difficult for us to realize it."

Strong communication between older drivers and their families is a critical defense against the dangers, according to groups such as AARP, which offers an online seminar called "We Need to Talk" to help relatives and friends approach older drivers whose skills behind the wheel are slipping.

"I can think of a couple of cases where relatives have taken the license, but the person was still independent and probably got another car," Barbee said. "The families are usually the ones that can intercede in that."