

Report: Texas ranks 2nd in fatalities involving drivers 65 or older

March 26--Former Farmersville resident Joe Dickherber, 68, considers driving a major part of his lifestyle. Since 2005, he and his wife, Wanda Dickherber, 67, have been living and traveling in their RV.

But as years have passed, he has noticed a difference in his driving abilities.

"The glare is much worse for me driving at night," he said. "Your eyes don't seem to handle it as well."

Joe Dickherber has limited his driving at night, and also has taken several classes with AARP's Texas Driver Safety program, where he's learned more about dealing with some of the driving challenges people face as they age.

"I think it's good, as you get older, to take the class and review those things and say, 'Hey, am I being a danger to anybody else?'" he said.

In a recent report by the Road Information Program, a nonprofit transportation research group known as TRIP, Texas ranked second in the nation in the number of drivers 65 and older killed in car accidents and in the number of fatal crashes involving drivers 65 or older.

The report is based on 2010 statistics provided by the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration. In Texas 397 people died as a result of crashes involving drivers 65 or older, and 224 drivers 65 or older were killed.

But Texas fell 4 percent below the national average in the share of fatal crashes involving that age group.

"Texas had some of the biggest numbers, and that's just a function of being a large state," said Frank Moretti, TRIP's director of policy and research.

The report also offers safety recommendations, including roadway enhancements, education, improvements to vehicles and more transportation accessibility for the older generation.

"As people age, there is going to be a diminishment of skills applicable to driving," Moretti said. "So the challenge to the transportation community is: How do you accommodate all these older people?"

TRIP's report states that the population of

Americans 65 and older is expected to grow 60 percent by 2025.

In Texas, there are about 483,000 licensed drivers 79 or older, according to the Texas Department of Public Safety.

A focus on inattention

DPS and the Texas Department of Transportation didn't express particular concern about the report, as both departments consider improving the safety of all motorists a priority.

"There was nothing earth-shattering about this information," said Michelle Releford, TxDOT spokeswoman for the Dallas district. "If the report does anything, hopefully it will make people think about safety in general and about driver inattention."

TxDOT aims to include safety enhancements as it works through its construction projects. It is working on building shoulders for Interstate 635 in Dallas and U.S. Highway 75 in McKinney. It also has been replacing older street signs with newer versions made to appear brighter and has been installing reflectors on roadways to help motorists at night.

Texas takes an extra precaution with older drivers. It requires 79-year-olds to renew their license after a vision exam. The license is valid for six years, after which the driver must renew again to receive a license that will last two years.

Lonny Haschel, Dallas-area spokesman for DPS, said the department is always working to educate the community about driver safety.

"Everyone can do their part to get the word out," Haschel said, "but it does come down to a personal responsibility."

AARP class

DPS and TRIP say seniors who notice changes in their driving abilities should enroll in a driving class.

In the past two years, AARP has seen a 10 to 20 percent increase in demand for its Texas Driver Safety program classes, which teach older drivers how to adjust to the changes they may be experiencing.

"The ability to drive helps older Texans stay connected to their friends, family and

community," said Rafael Ayuso, Texas spokesman for AARP. "So it's very important that AARP, as the representative for the senior community, get involved in promoting safer driving."

The group doesn't specify an age at which drivers should consider enrolling in a class but rather suggests that drivers monitor their abilities and be proactive in adjusting to changes.

Although Joe Dickherber has benefited from the classes as a senior citizen, he thinks the issue goes beyond the older generation.

"I think it wouldn't hurt anyone to have a driver's review every couple of years," he said. "It makes you focus on things you have taken for granted for a long time."

AT A GLANCE: Tips for older drivers

Keep a safe following distance, at least two or three seconds, between you and the driver in front of you.

Buckle up.

Be mindful of changes in your eyesight and hearing.

If you wear eyeglasses when driving, be sure to keep your prescription current, and wear the proper glasses for day and night driving.

Do not fall victim to road rage.

Adjust your mirrors to minimize blind spots.

Glance frequently from the road ahead to your rearview mirror, side mirrors and instrument panel when driving.

Be mindful of side effects of prescription medications.

Increase your concentration on the road in difficult situations by limiting distractions. Switch off the radio, minimize discussions with passengers, avoid using cellphones, and keep the inside temperature of your car comfortable.

Keep mirrors, headlights and taillights clean and in good repair. Remember to wash both the inside and outside of windshields and windows regularly.

SOURCES: Texas Department of Public Safety, aarp.org