

EDITORIAL

Keep older drivers in mind

The Editorial Board

People 65 and over are far more active and mobile than any preceding generation.

According to TRIP, a trade and research association of insurers, engineers and other highway interests, the number of drivers older than 65 increased by 38 percent between 2006 and 2016, from 30.1 million to 41.7 million. Among all drivers, 15 percent were 65 or older in 2006; 19 percent were that old in 2016.

In Pennsylvania, 1.91 million licensed drivers were 65 or older in 2016, the fifth-highest number in the country behind California, Florida, Texas, and New York.

Total traffic fatalities rose by 22 percent between 2012 and 2016, TRIP said, whereas the number of fatal crashes involving at least one driver older than 65 rose by 21 percent. Pennsylvania had the sixth highest number of fatalities among older drivers in 2016 with 267, behind Florida, 682; Texas, 568; California, 554; Georgia, 299; and North Carolina, 285. In Pennsylvania, 22 percent of all fatal crashes involved at least one driver 65 or older, eighth highest nationally.

TRIP said that older drivers are more likely to die in a crash, compared with younger drivers in the same types of crashes, due to greater physical fragility.

Due to experience and recognition of reduced physical ability, older drivers tend to drive more cautiously than younger drivers, according to TRIP and the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration.

Studies by the highway agency show that some aspects of highway design pose particular changes to older drivers, and TRIP says improvements in those areas can help all drivers and boost safety.

Intersections are a key concern. According to the NHTSA, 37 percent of crashes in which at least one driver is 65 or older involve intersections. Among crashes in which no driver is 65 or older, only 20 percent were at intersections.

The issue is left-hand turns. TRIP contends the toll at intersections could be reduced through clearer signage and pavement markings, better lighting, slightly wider turn lanes and longer entrance and exit lanes would help to reduce the toll among older drivers.

As the number of older drivers increases, and the use of self-driving cars remains far into the future, state highway agencies should design road projects with older drivers in mind, which translates into greater safety for all.