New study finds fatality rate rising among older drivers

Better road designs, signage would help

By Ed Blazina - Pittsburgh Post-Gazette

States should do more to make roads safer for older drivers, who are at increasing risk of dying in crashes, a national study released Tuesday recommended.

The fatality rate of drivers age 65 or older is increasing even faster than their percentage of all drivers, according to the 27-page study by TRIP, a national transportation research group.

TRIP said larger road signs with brighter lights, more roundabouts to reduce turns across traffic and longer entrance and exit lanes would help all drivers but especially older ones. Those drivers can have diminished eyesight and reduced reflexes that lead to problems in estimating the speed and distance of other vehicles and safely making driving decisions, the study said.

“The positive sign is more older Americans are leading more active lifestyles,” said Rocky Moretti, director of policy and research for TRIP. “The negative is an even higher percentage are dying in traffic accidents.”

From 2012 to 2016, the study said, the number of U.S. drivers age 65 or older increased from about 36 million to 41.7 million (about 16 percent) but the number of older drivers killed jumped from 3,741 to 4,204, or about a 21 percent increase. Part of the reason older drivers die from injuries in crashes is they aren’t as healthy as younger drivers.

The best way to help all drivers, but especially older ones, would be to “eliminate the ambiguity” that insufficient road signs, poor lighting and other shortcomings can create, Mr. Moretti said.

“The challenge is to create a roadway environment for older drivers, and really all drivers, that’s as safe as it can be,” he said. “These are cost-effective changes.”

The study showed that in 2015 74 percent of the fatal crashes for older drivers occurred in the daytime, 70 percent on weekdays and 67 percent involved other vehicles. The numbers for all fatalities were starkly different: 49 percent were in daylight, 59 percent on weekdays and 44 percent involved another vehicle.

Intersections seem to be a particular problem for older drivers. In 2016, 37 percent of fatal crashes with one driver 65 or older occurred at intersections but only 20 percent of fatal crashes for drivers under 65 occurred at intersections.

“Older drivers generally have problems selecting appropriate gaps in oncoming traffic and estimating the speed of oncoming vehicles with respect to left turns off a mainline highway,” the study said. “Each advancing year of age after 65 increases by 8 percent the odds of getting into a crash that involves turning left.”

In 2016, Pennsylvania had 1.9 million drivers 65 or older, about 21 percent of all drivers in the state, and the state ranks in the top 10 nationally in the number of older drivers and fatalities. About 22 percent of the state’s fatalities that year, 267 people, occurred in crashes with at least one driver 65 or older.

“It would behoove us to recognize that, understand that, and look at our road designs and see what we could do to help,” said Jason Wagner, manager director of the Pennsylvania Highway Information Association.

Rich Kirkpatrick, spokesman for the state Department of Transportation, said the number of deaths involving drivers 65 and older has dropped from 300 in 2014, to 279 in 2015 to 267 in 2016. The state has taken steps in construction projects to provide larger signs; rumble strips between lanes and on edges to keep drivers from veering out of lanes; and upgrading pavement markings to help prevent drivers from going the wrong way on ramps and other roads.

The department also reviews and approves courses for mature drivers provided by groups such as AAA and AARP and provides programs at senior centers and other events.

Ed Blazina: eblazina@post-gazette.com, 412-263-1470 or on Twitter @EdBlazina.
Statistics for older drivers in Pennsylvania

A study by TRIP shows where Pennsylvania drivers 65 and older rank in terms of fatal accidents.

Number of licensed drivers, by state, age 65+, 2016
Including percentage of licensed drivers that are age 65+ for selected states

Number of fatalities involving at least one 65+ driver, 2016
Including percentage of fatalities involving at least one 65+ for selected states