

Michael Paris, Aging Services Program Coordinator
New York State Office for the Aging
Albany, NY

OLDER DRIVER ASSISTANCE NETWORK

Description:

Community-based Older Driver Assistance Networks (ODANs) are being developed in New York State to: (1) assist older drivers remain safely behind the wheel, (2) help family caregivers effectively address unsafe driving situations involving an impaired, at-risk older family member, and (3) provide support and access to resources to anyone attempting to help a potentially at-risk older driver. These networks are a partnership of experts from the fields of aging, healthcare, law enforcement, rehabilitation, and transportation, together with consumers and advocacy groups. In urban, suburban and rural areas, collaboration among a network of county-based partners, or a cluster of regional partners, promotes community conversations that can lead to increased individual driver safety, as well as improved highway safety for everyone.

Demographic change is a major factor underlying the development of ODANs. Transportation is one of the most important issues for older individuals, and as the Baby Boomers age, increasing numbers of older persons will be driving their personal cars—for a variety of reasons: (1) the emotional and mental health benefits accruing from the independence associated with continued driving, (2) the flexibility of having access to one's own car for daily tasks, activities, and health appointments, (3) relief from the reluctance and indignity of constantly placing the burden for one's transportation needs on busy family members and friends, and (4) often, as the only option in the face of limited or no alternative means of transportation. In addition, public health and long-term care policies that promote the ability of older people to continue living in their own homes throughout the elder years will result in many more people driving for longer periods of time.

In discussions about driving issues, older drivers often face discriminatory attitudes based purely on their age, with simplistic solutions offered for what is really a complex situation. In contrast, ODANs are a reasoned response to a multifaceted aging issue, which is only one aspect of the larger safe-driving and safe-roads concerns of communities. Driver safety issues involve all age groups, as is evidenced by U. S. data from the 2000 Census Bureau, which indicates (1) that the proportion of drivers in traffic accidents is greater among younger age groups than older age groups, and (2) substantial numbers of drivers of *all* ages are involved in traffic accidents:

Age group	# of licensed drivers	# of licensed drivers in traffic accidents	% of age group's licensed drivers in traffic accidents
25 – 34	37.3 M	4.9 M	13 %
35 – 44	41.9 M	4.4 M	11 %
45 – 54	33.7 M	2.9 M	9 %
55-64	21.3 M	1.6 M	7 %
65 – 74	15.2 M	1.0 M	7 %
75+	10.6 M	710 T	7 %

Professionals and advocates stress that issues around driving are not a matter of age, but how a driver functions on the streets and highways. Within various population groups, differing factors have an impact on their functional ability while driving. Factors specifically related to aging underlie the efforts of communities to establish Older Driver Assistance Networks to address the concerns of law enforcement officers, health care workers, aging advocates, and older people's caregiving family members, as well as older persons themselves:

- There is a relationship between increasing age and vulnerability to a variety of frailties, and when a driver's health or physical limitation gets in the way of on-road safety, dangerous and life threatening situations can occur.
- The two most common aging-related impairments are vision and hearing loss, two critical sensory elements needed for safe driving.
- Although the majority of older adults are living healthy lives for much longer periods of time, some older people experience declines in memory, physical strength, agility, reaction time, or range of motion. Any of these maladies affect the safe operation of a motor vehicle.
- Increasing longevity is resulting in the rising prevalence of older people with cognitive impairment, particularly Alzheimer's disease. Many individuals diagnosed with early stages of Alzheimer's disease are licensed drivers who own or have access to a motor vehicle.
- The side-effects of medications, regardless of age, can temper an individual's ability to drive safely.
- Trends show that older persons are driving greater distances for the necessities of life as once-local retailers and services move to malls and commercial zones farther away from residential areas.
- While older drivers are involved in fewer traffic accidents than other age groups, when in a crash, older drivers are far more likely to sustain fatal injuries due to physical frailties resulting from aging.

In the ODAN model, an assembly of partners working together is enabled to:

- Establish a reliable, sustainable, and broad-based network of mutually supportive referral pathways and coordinated support services for anyone attempting to provide assistance to an older driver;
- Build shared capacity among network partners to assist primary referral sources (such as families, physicians, professional aging services providers, and law enforcement) in dealing with safety concerns related to an older driver;
- Provide information and assistance to help the older driver, their families, and other members of the community to successfully identify and address potentially unsafe and at-risk situations; and

- Provide education to older people, families, and the general community to:
(1) promote greater awareness about interventions that are available to help older persons drive safely longer, and
(2) support older individuals who are no longer able to drive without presenting a risk to themselves or others.

Benefits:

- Older driver collaborative networks can be successfully implemented in rural, suburban, and urban areas.
- The ODAN model is replicable to address driving and safe-road issues among other age groups or population groups.
- ODANs are a preventative model—enabling individual older driver issues to be addressed before a crisis, injury, or death occurs.
- There is little or no cost associated with the establishment of an Older Driver Assistance Network.
- In the face of a growing older population— with increasing numbers of older adults staying in their communities and living much longer lives—older adults can continue to drive safely, maintaining their independence for longer periods of times, which has been shown to have a positive impact on health and well-being.
- The concerns of family caregivers about the safety of older family members, as well as their concerns about potential injuries caused to others, are moderated; and their substantial caregiving efforts and decision-making are supported through education, help, and resources.
- Inappropriate actions and decisions by family members and professionals are reduced—for example, in the many situations where they are aware of the problem but are often reluctant to remove or limit an older person's driving ability because they understand that this can be a heart-breaking, life-changing event for an older person.
- There is increased knowledge and understanding among professionals in community agencies and organizations, who frequently lack the knowledge and information necessary to assist older people and their families in unsafe-driving situations.
- Family members have an increased ability to successfully address driving issues presented by their older family members. Families are usually the first to be confronted by problems associated with a potentially unsafe older driver. Without a coordinated, collaborative network approach, many families are unaware of available help or resources on "aging and driving"; others may be able to find various resources, but lack the ability to assemble all the pieces of the puzzle, and others need help in successfully implementing tips and techniques when applying them in a family situation.

- The coalition framework of an ODAN reduces fragmentation and gaps in successfully addressing an individual older driver issue. For example, where there is no coalition, law enforcement officials are often engaging an older driver for the first time upon observing an act of unsafe driving or a serious crash; or, physicians are aware of older person's decline in physical and mental functioning or the side effects of medications that can affect driving ability, but often are unaware of the steps they, the older person, or the family can take to receive help regarding continued safe driving or alternative transit.
- Traffic accidents are reduced as, according to traffic safety experts from across the country, the key to safe driving is to intervene early before an on-the-road crisis or death occurs.
- The goals of many segments of our communities are supported—public and private agencies, families, law enforcement officials, physicians, public policymakers, and other professionals who serve older persons—all of whom have an investment in maintaining the independence and the safety of older people.

Impediments or barriers to development or implementation:

Communities and organizations have not reported significant barriers or opposition to the development and implementation an Older Driver Assistance Network. However, some challenges include:

- Individual public and private agencies often view a problem exclusively through the lens of their own agency's mission, often lacking an ability to visualize a blend of interventions to address the complex issues facing older drivers.
- Coalition-building is not always easy; for example:
 - Community support and political will are essential to facilitate needed changes among all partners for maintaining safe mobility by older persons.
 - Routine behaviors and attitudes (particularly, a traditional "silo mode" of functional operation, or an ingrained resistance to change in how "something has always been done") can present an impediment to the collaborative structure of an ODAN.
 - Some local partners may not be able to see how they fit into "the bigger picture" of community well-being, or fail to recognize how collaboration with others will improve overall assistance to older adults in the community.
- Marketing the program: community members are often hesitant to intervene when family members, friends, or neighbors become potentially at-risk drivers.

Resource—examples:

Older Driver Family Assistance Network, Erie County Department of Senior Services, Buffalo, New York, 14202; (716) 858-7253; kelly.asher@erie.gov; www.erie.gov/driving.

- Older Driver Family Assistance Network, Westchester County Department of Senior Programs and Services, Mount Vernon, New York:
www.westchestergov.com.
- Older Driver Assistance Project, New York State Office for the Aging, Albany, New York: www.aging.ny.gov.

Resource—written and web:

- Federal and New York State laws that relate to traffic safety and older drivers:
<http://www.nysgtsc.state.ny.us/enablinleg.htm>.
- Philip LePore (2000). *When You Are Concerned: A Handbook for Families, Friends and Caregivers Worried about the Safety of an Aging Driver*. Albany, New York: New York State Office for the Aging. This is an award-winning, 56-page publication developed to guide families facing the dilemma of what to do when an aging family member is an at-risk driver. The New York State Office for the Aging was funded to develop this publication by the New York State Governor's Traffic Safety Committee, with support from the New York State Department of Motor Vehicles and the New York State Department of Health. For a paper copy of *When You Are Concerned*, contact the New York State Office for the Aging: 1-800-342-9871, or email nysofa@ofa.state.ny.us. The publication is also available on-line: <http://www.aging.ny.gov>.
- National Highway Traffic Safety Administration: <http://www.nhtsa.gov/>. Under *Key Issues*, select "Senior Driving."
- *How to Understand and Influence Older Drivers* (June, 2006). U. S. Department of Transportation: National Highway Traffic Safety Administration., <http://www.nhtsa.gov/people/injury/olddrive/UnderstandOlderDrivers/>.
- National Institutes of Health, National Eye Institute, Bethesda, MD: "What You Should Know," *Information for Healthy Vision* is available on the Web: www.nei.nih.gov/lowvision/content/know.asp.
- American Medical Association, Chicago, IL: *AMA Physician's Guide to Assessing and Counseling Older Drivers*. This ten-chapter book, developed by the American Medical Association in cooperation with the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration, is available on the Web at: www.ama-assn.org; on the top menu, choose "Physician Resources" and choose "Patient Educational Materials"; on the left menu, choose "Older Driver Safety"; on the left menu, choose "Assessing Counseling Older Drivers."
- National Highway and Traffic Safety Administration (NHTSA) and American Society on Aging (ASA) (nd). *Drive Well: Promoting Older Driver Safety and Mobility in Your Community*. Washington, DC: NHTSA; ASA. A tool kit to prepare professionals for effective conversations about driver safety and community mobility issues with older adults, their families, and community members.

<http://www.nhtsa.gov/Driving+Safety/Driver+Education/Senior+Drivers/Drive+Well+Toolkit:+Promoting+Older+Driver+Safety+and+Mobility+in+Your+Community>.

Resource—technical assistance contact names:

- Beverly Carter, Program Coordinator
Older Driver Family Assistance Network
Westchester County Department of Senior Programs and Services
9 South First Avenue, 10th Floor
Mount Vernon, New York 10550
(914) 813-6188 or (914) 813-6400
Bdc1@westchestergov.com
- Michael Paris, Project Director
Older Driver Assistance Project
New York State Office for the Aging
2 Empire State Plaza
Albany, New York 12223
(518) 474-2473
Michael.paris@ofa.state.ny.us
nysofa@ofa.state.ny.us.