

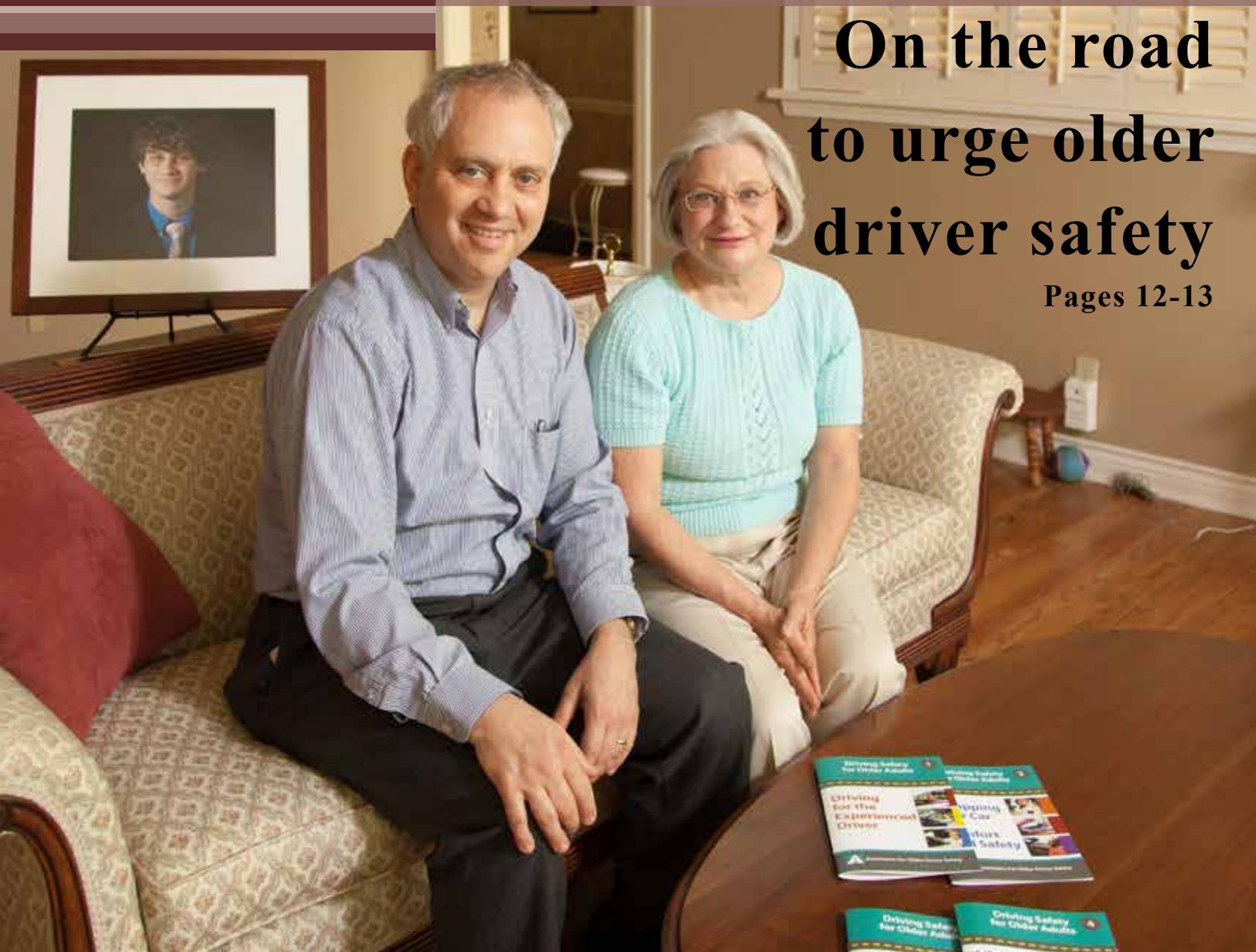
the

Best Times

INFORMING & SUPPORTING JOHNSON COUNTY'S 60+ ADULTS

On the road to urge older driver safety

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Driving vs. aging: *'No one wants to hand over their keys after driving a lifetime'*

By Gerald Hay

A Leawood couple is in the front seat of a nationwide campaign to keep aging drivers safe behind the wheel and unsafe aging drivers off the road.

Susan Cohen and Mitchell Krasnopoler, her husband of 33 years, know first-hand about the potential dangers and tragic accidents of an aging driver population.

They lost their son Nathan Krasnopoler, a 20-year-old sophomore at John Hopkins University in Baltimore, in 2011. He was riding his bicycle near the campus when an 83-year-old driver on the same road spotted him. When she turned into the bike lane to enter her driveway, she did not check for his location. Although she violated some traffic laws and had past glaucoma surgeries, she was never turned in for an evaluation after the crash to determine if she was fit to drive.

To them, the accident was preventable. It's emblematic of what they view as an increasing problem as the elderly population booms: aging drivers. Many of them are clinging to the independence that cars give them, but some are losing their ability to safely operate the vehicles, causing more crashes.

To address that issue, they founded the Americans For Older Driver Safety (AFODS) organization – first in Maryland and now in Kansas and Missouri. Its mission is to raise awareness and education about the impact of aging on mobility, the need for older drivers to adjust their driving habits to maintain safety, and the need to plan ahead for future transportation needs.

"No one wants to hand over their keys after driving a lifetime," Cohen said.

That's not the intent of AFODS. Instead, the organization is designed to assist older drivers in recognizing physical, medical, and/or cognitive issues that may impact their driving skills and reaction times along with educating them about ways to improve and remain on the go.

For example, older drivers may consider equipping their vehicles with back-up cameras, sensors, larger mirrors, and other devices to enhance their awareness of the road environment and reduce risk. Some may decide to limit or stop driving altogether, looking at other available transportation options.

"It's not about age. It's about function," Cohen said.

Krasnopoler agreed.

"Most older people are very good drivers," he added.

Future to bring more older drivers

The number of older drivers, both locally and nationally, is forecast to skyrocket with the retiring Baby Boomer Generation. Experts anticipate the population of Americans 65 and older to more than double from the current 40 million to over 88 million by 2050.

Turning 70, 80, or older doesn't necessarily make a person a bad driver, but the unsafe driving risks go up with age. According to the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration (NHTSA), fatality rates per mile driven for drivers begin to climb after age 70 and increases steeply after age 80 even while these age groups drive fewer miles.

"We can't assume people will drive safely until they die," Cohen said.

Putting the brake on that trend will not be easy. Driving in America has long been a way of life and the main means of mobility.

Drivers, as they age, need to change their habits to match the physical and cognitive changes that are part of the aging



Susan Cohen and Mitchell Krasnopoler are founders of the Americans For Older Driver Safety.

process.

For example, normal aging causes functional and medical changes that might affect driving. Reflexes, flexibility, vision, memory, and the ability to focus all decline with age. Medicines that treat various ailments also make it more difficult to focus and make snap decisions while driving.

"Cognitive changes as well as vision changes can take you off the road," Cohen said.

According to a NHTSA study, senior drivers are less likely than other drivers to be in crashes involving high speeds or alcohol, but they are more likely to crash at intersections where they miss a stop sign or turn left in front of oncoming traffic.

"Where single-vehicle rollovers can be described as a young person's crash, side impact appears to be an old person's crash," the study reported.

There are no common national standards for determining when senior drivers should be kept off the roads while being fair to older drivers who remain capable.

Licensing renewals vary in states

Most states do not require older drivers to renew licenses in

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‘No one wants to hand over their keys’

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person, and only one — Illinois — requires them to pass road tests, which can be crucial in identifying drivers whose physical ability or mental awareness has diminished. Most state driver’s license laws require basic eye exams, but typically cannot detect a driver’s diminished physical capacity and cognitive awareness.

In Missouri, drivers 70 and older renew every three years, and in Illinois, it’s every two years, beginning at 81. Maryland, on the other hand, has an eight-year renewal period that requires drivers to appear at a motor vehicle office every other renewal, meaning drivers of any age may not have to appear in person for 16 years.

Cohen thinks the renewal process for drivers age 65 and older in Kansas is “pretty good” with a four-year license while younger drivers can renew every six years.

She also would like Kansas and other states to offer training of Department of Motor Vehicle or revenue division staff to better spot/screen drivers who may be medically impaired while processing their license renewals.

“Driving is absolutely important, and there is not enough alternative mobility,” Cohen said.

Self-evaluation by drivers also is important as a proactive approach to driving safety for older adults before becoming a sad reactive result of becoming a traffic statistic in an accident report. Cohen indicates a common reaction from older drivers involved in a crash.

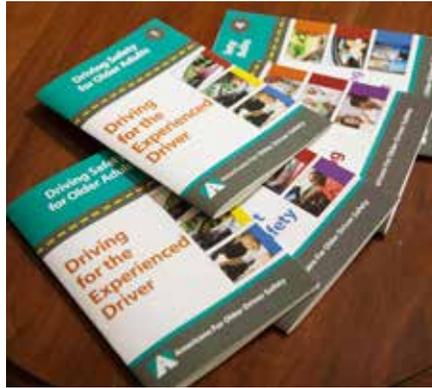
“Not one of them thought they were unsafe to drive,” she said.

Driving habits need to change

Education and training will help to ensure older driver safety and driving abilities along with personal decisions to downsize their driving, such as not to drive at night, in unfamiliar areas, or on long trips without someone else to help navigate. It can begin with the decision to drive one less day a week.

“We encourage planning for driving retirement,” Krasnopoler said.

AFODS offers research-based safety tips and four informa-



tional brochures to help older drivers and to advise them about public transportation and other mobility options for aging adults.

Local services include Catch-a-Ride by the Johnson County Department of Human Services, Special Edition and The JO by Johnson County Transit in partnership with Kansas City Area Transportation Authority, JET Express by the Jewish Community Center, and the 10/10 Taxi service.

Both Johnson County and the metro region will need to provide more mobility options in the future to serve older drivers willing to park their vehicles.

Driving refresher courses also are available, such as the AARP Smart Driver Program for drivers 50 and older. The classes, at various sites in Johnson County, deal with the effects of aging on driving and how to stay safe.

Cohen has served on a special Older Driver Emphasis Area Team as a facet of the Kansas Department of Transportation Strategic Highway Safety Plan (SHSP) to reduce fatal and serious injury crashes involving older drivers. Formed in April 2013, the team members represent a broad cross-section of government agencies, health care professions, and service providers concerned about transportation and older Kansans.

“With the predicted 66 percent increase in the age 65+ segment of Kansas’ population, we need to plan now for the engineering and behavioral sides of traffic safety, as well as the services provided by our team partners,” Gretchen Gleue, KDOT’s Older Driver team leader, said.

No state has an age limit on drivers. Cohen points out the oldest driver with a valid license in Illinois is 107.

Her mother drives in Pennsylvania, but has opted to change her driving habits, including no night driving or taking long trips, for her own safety and the safety of other motorists sharing the road with her.

“She’s very safe, very cautious,” Cohen said with a smile. “My mother is 91. She’s a good driver.” **BT**

Note: More information about Americans For Older Driver Safety is available by visiting its website at www.afods.org.

‘Get Up and Go’ Transportation Expo set June 3