

Elderly Drivers: The New Face of Florida's Motoring Public

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Abstract

The demographics of the nation's drivers are changing. Americans are living longer resulting in more elderly drivers sharing the roadways. By the year 2020, Florida's population of persons 65 and older will double. The influx of older drivers will present challenges to law enforcement professionals. A survey of line level law enforcement officers will provide insight into their ability to deal with the issues facing elderly drivers. This information will be helpful in identifying training needs, community resources, transportation alternatives, and licensing issues relating to aging drivers.

Introduction

Law enforcement professionals are facing a new era in traffic enforcement and management. As the elderly driving population grows, so do the challenges facing law enforcement. By the year 2020 the 65 and older population will double in Florida (www.floridagrاندdriver.org). These statistics demonstrate the need for a comprehensive plan to address the issue.

Assessment of elderly motorists is essential to identify drivers who are considered "at-risk." The assessment process is one shared by law enforcement officers, medical professionals, licensing officials, family members, and the elderly driver. Self-assessment is perhaps the most important tool available to the aging driver. Community involvement is an essential element in dealing with the issues confronting elderly drivers.

As law enforcement officers encounter the aging drivers, it is imperative that they possess the training and skills to properly assess these drivers. Many elderly motorists exhibit excellent driving skills. There is a section of the elderly population that present a danger to the motoring public. The task for law enforcement is to develop a methodology to deal with this problem.

The focus of this research is to determine the preparedness of law enforcement officers in identifying those elderly drivers who pose a threat to themselves and other motorists. Additionally, it will explore the options available to law enforcement officers in resolving issues confronting these drivers.

Literature Review

Demographics

Statistics from the U.S. Census Bureau indicate in the year 2000, there were 2,807,650 persons over the age of 65 residing in Florida. An estimated 4,980,142 persons in the 65 and over age group will call Florida home in the year 2020 (www.edr.state.fl.us). These numbers reflect a 56 percent increase in population for this age group. In an interview with Florida Trend, Dr. Charles Longino reported that Florida leads the nation in the migration of persons over the age of 60 since 1960 (Longino, 2007). Measured in five-year periods, Florida has attracted from one-fifth to a quarter of all interstate migrants over 60 in the past five census counts.

The demographics of Florida are changing. As “Baby Boomers” begin to retire, Florida’s population will grow. Medical advances have made significant increases to life expectancy. Persons 85 years and older are the fastest growing demographic group in the United States (Florida Grand Driver, 2007). The prospect to outlive the ability to safely operate a motor vehicle has dramatically increased for many drivers.

The Older Driver

The motor vehicle plays an important part in our daily life. The driving privilege affords motorists the ability to move about their community, state, and nation at will. It offers a sense of independence to the vast majority of citizens. As drivers age, their skills relating to operating a motor vehicle begin to diminish. The aging process contributes to a decline in motor skills and in perceptual and cognitive abilities. Pain, weakness and stiffness experienced by older drivers can limit both function and range of motion.

The loss of physical agility may affect the driver’s ability to perform functions critical to the safe operation of a motor vehicle. Range of motion problems may not allow drivers to look over their shoulder while backing a vehicle. Weakness in lower extremities can create problems moving from the accelerator pedal to the brake pedal. Many aging drivers exhibit slower reflexes, delayed reaction times, and difficulty concentrating. These issues put elderly drivers at a distinct disadvantage when operating motor vehicles.

A common problem for elderly drivers is weakened vision. The aging driver often has difficulty focusing on moving objects, their vision decreases in low light conditions, and frequently have difficulty adjusting to glare. Cataracts and the onset of glaucoma are a few of the vision problems encountered by elderly drivers.

Chronic health conditions contribute to the diminished driving capabilities of elderly drivers. Alzheimer’s disease and dementia are conditions frequently associated with “at-risk” drivers. Medications prescribed to elderly drivers for diagnosed illnesses can also impact the cognitive and motor skills of the elderly.

These factors cause the elderly driver to be more susceptible to injuries or death when involved in vehicular crashes. A General Account Office (GAO) analysis of National Highway Transportation Administration (NHTSA) and United States Department of Transportation (USDOT) data indicates the 75 and older age group rank highest in the fatal crashes by driver age group per 100 million miles traveled (GAO, 2007). The fatality rate among drivers 85 and older is higher than any other age group, including teens (IIHS, 2007).

The per capita crash rate of seniors is low, but the per mile crash rates are high (IIHS, 2001). Many older people no longer drive and those who do may limit their driving. Physical fragility is the main reason older drivers are dying, not their over involvement in crashes. An analysis of crash data clearly shows that elderly driver become more vulnerable with each mile driven.

Designing Safer Roadways

Roadway design plays an important part in reducing the occurrence of crashes involving elderly drivers. Crash statistics indicate that intersections pose the greatest threat to elderly drivers. Failure to yield the right of way by drivers 80 and older resulted in over half of the intersection crashes. Redesign of intersections can reduce the threat. Converting two-way stop intersections into four-way stops reduce the potential for crashes by 50 percent. Circular intersections known as roundabouts also significantly reduce crashes (IIHS, 2001).

Another area of concern for the older driver is making left turns. Protected left turn signals permit turning when other traffic is stopped. The addition of turn lanes help to reduce left-turn and rear-end collisions. These changes create a safer driving environment for drivers.

The Federal Highway Administration has recommended several guidelines to improve safety on the nation's roadways. The guidelines recommend signs with larger lettering, enhanced street lighting, extended pedestrian walk signal times, and various engineering modifications that will aid senior drivers (Farrow & Likes, 2007).

Vehicle Design

Vehicle manufacturers are in the process of improving the safety of vehicles. Available in some new cars are belt force limiting devices. These devices are designed to reduce the risk of rib fractures, a common injury among elderly drivers. Belt force limiters play out the belt when the force levels exceed a certain threshold (IIHS, 2001).

Automakers are also developing new types of safety belts that could help distribute forces across more of the body. Advanced airbag technologies are being developed that would be better suited to the elderly driver. Engineers at Ford have designed vehicles with larger controls and non-reflective interior surfaces to reduce glare (IIHS, 2001).

Law Enforcement Role

The traditional role of law enforcement has been that of traffic enforcement and crash investigation. Officers are called upon daily to issue citations for traffic infractions. Often during their shift they are dispatched to investigate traffic crashes and conduct traffic control. These tasks tie up resources and are time consuming.

While these will remain the primary function of law enforcement officers, a future role will be that of a facilitator. As the demographics of the motoring public changes, the role of law enforcement will evolve. The aging of Florida's drivers will require officers to adopt new strategies in dealing with them. Officers will need to evaluate the elderly drivers they encounter to determine if they present a risk to themselves or other drivers. It is important that law enforcement officers are provided with the information needed to properly assess medical and physiological issues impacting the performance of the aging driver.

An officer who issues a warning citation to an elderly driver may actually be doing the driver and the community a disservice (NHTSA, 2005). A check of the driving history of an elderly driver will help to establish a pattern of driving. A citation may be the "wake up" call for the elderly driver that might be considered "at-risk." Officers should recognize driving behavior that indicates the need for re-examination of the driver. They should also become familiar with cues that are indicative of "at-risk" drivers.

Sensitivity training is an essential element in preparing officers to deal with the aging driver. Officers should be aware of alternatives that are available to assist the elderly driver. Those resources might be public transportation, driver-training courses, or community service organizations. It is important to realize that the decision to stop driving is a life-altering event for the elderly driver. It has long-range implications.

Driver Assessment

Driver assessment is perhaps the most important step in evaluating the skills of the elderly driver. The assessment process can involve different entities within the community. Licensing of drivers in the State of Florida is a task handled by the Department Highway Safety and Motor Vehicles (DHSMV).

The re-examination of drivers takes place in four and six year increments, depending upon individual driving records. Renewal of a driver's license can be done via the Internet or mail. Only two successive renewals may be made electronically or by mail regardless of age. Drivers over the age of 79 are required to pass a vision test.

Medical professionals also play an important role in the assessment of drivers. Elderly persons are more likely to visit their physician on a regular basis. These office visits present the physician with an opportunity to assess conditions that are likely to affect the driving skills of their patients.

In 2003, the National Highway Transportation Safety Administration (NHTSA) and the American Medical Association (AMA) published the Physician's Guide to Assessing and Counseling Older Drivers (www.ama-assn.org). This guide was prepared to educate medical providers on assessment criteria for elderly drivers. The NHTSA also began to explore the use of medications by older drivers and its effects on driving. Interaction between physicians, pharmacists, and patients is an important step in identifying medications that could impair the driving capabilities of the elderly person.

As previously mentioned, law enforcement encounters with elderly drivers presents an opportunity for assessment of their driving skills. Per Florida Statute 322.126 (2) (3), any officer who believes that a driver is a risk to themselves or other drivers should submit a Medical Reporting Form to the Department of Highway Safety and Motor Vehicles with the appropriate information regarding the driver (www.hsmv.state.fl.us). The investigation of vehicle crashes also provides officers the opportunity to request a re-examination (when documented on a Long Form Crash Report).

Family members and friends also bear the responsibility of assessing the driving skills of elderly drivers. They are perhaps one of the most valuable assets the elderly driver possesses. Their frequent interaction with their aging family member or friend allows them the opportunity to monitor the driving performance of the driver. They tend to be more familiar with health issues that could impact the elderly person's ability to safely operate a motor vehicle.

Family members are also better prepared to have "the talk" with a loved one whose driving skills are called into question. While the decision to stop driving is a difficult decision to make, the elderly driver may be more likely to stop driving if they have the support of family members or close friends.

The Agreement with My Family about Driving document offered by the Hartford Insurance Company can help to initiate a conversation with the elderly family member about their need to stop driving (www.thehartford.com). This document is an agreement between the elderly driver and their designee regarding the need to stop driving.

Self-assessment is undeniably the most important step an elderly driver can take to ensure the safety of themselves and the motoring public. Elderly persons are keenly aware of the effect that aging has upon them. Many elderly drivers alter their driving habits in order to compensate for the reduction in the driving skills. As vision problems occur, they tend to stop driving during nighttime hours. They may choose to drive during non-peak traveling times or just drive less. Elderly drivers may adjust their routes to avoid traffic congestion. Many choose to give up their driving privilege because they no longer feel comfortable operating a motor vehicle.

The American Association of Retired Persons (AARP) offers a self-assessment questionnaire for elderly drivers (www.aarp.org). The questionnaire offers the elderly driver insight into their competency to operate a motor vehicle. AARP also offers driver a safety program focusing on the problems associated with the aging driver.

Transportation Alternatives

The decision to give up one's driving privilege directly affects the mobility of senior citizens. Seniors living in urban areas have access to public transportation. Many of Florida's senior citizens live in rural areas with limited transportation resources. These individuals must rely upon family members, friends, or service organizations for their transportation needs.

The Florida Senior Safety Resource Center is an Internet based website specifically designed to provide transportation alternatives statewide (www.fssrc.php.ufl.edu). The website also offers an assessment tool as well as links to national resources for public transportation.

Method

The purpose of this research is to explore the perceptions of line-level law enforcement officers during their encounters with elderly drivers. A survey was created to address issues involving enforcement options for officers, roadside assessment of elderly drivers, and alternative resources available to deal with at-risk drivers. The survey consists of 10 multiple-choice questions and 3 questions requiring a written response.

A total of 250 surveys were distributed to Patrol Bureau and Traffic Unit deputies within the Lee County Sheriff's Office. Deputies participating in the survey are the rank of Sergeant and below. This group of law enforcement officers was chosen because of their daily interactions with Florida's motorists.

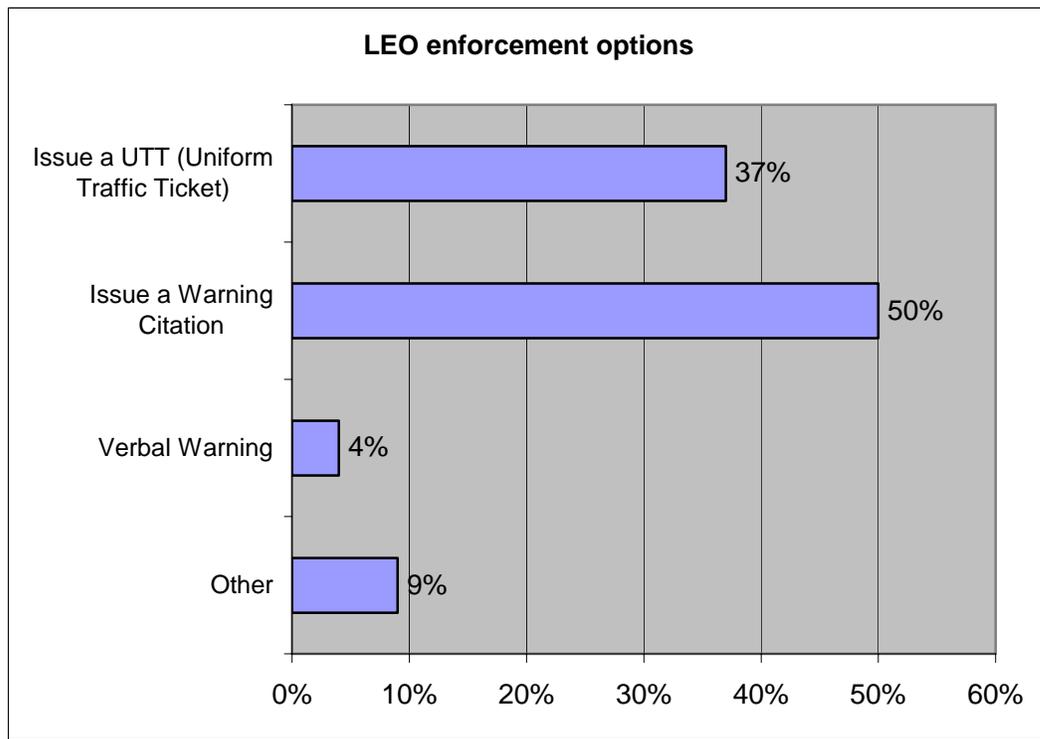
The survey queries officers about their preference concerning the issuance of citations versus warning tickets or verbal warnings for traffic infractions. It also questions officers about their observations in reference to driver demeanor and recognition of any indicators of medical or physical impairment. The survey addresses officers' familiarity with clues indicative of an elderly driver in need of re-examination and the process for requesting re-examination. Lastly, the survey seeks to determine if officers are aware of support organizations within their community that could assist elderly drivers should they be required to surrender their driver's license.

Survey data will focus on enforcement and assessment methods used by members of the Lee County Sheriff's Office during encounters with elderly drivers. The survey will seek to determine if methods currently used by law enforcement officers are sufficient in dealing with the issues facing elderly drivers. It will also identify any training issues that need to be addressed in dealing with at-risk drivers. This data will be a valuable resource for officers confronting elderly drivers in need of assistance.

Results

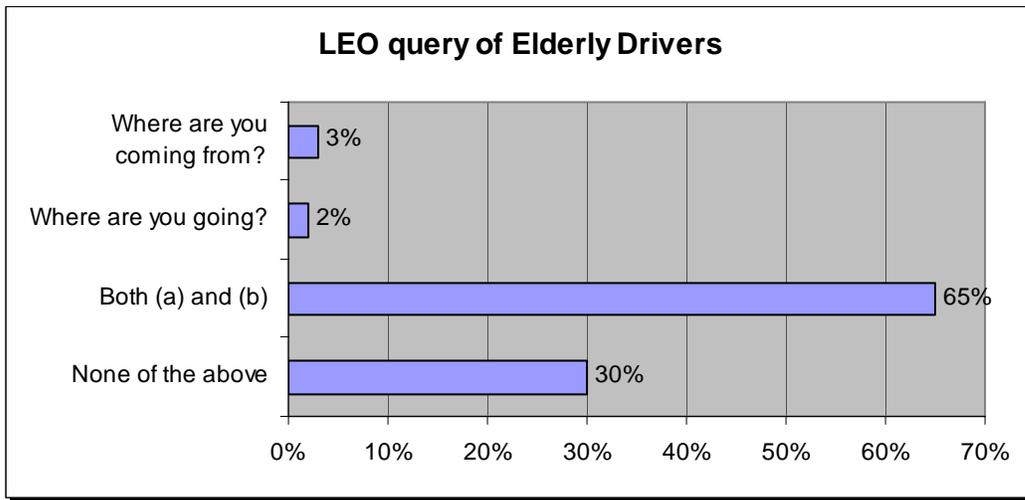
Of the 250 surveys distributed, 110 were returned resulting in a 44 percent response rate from the line-level law enforcement officers participating. The results of Questions 1 through 10 are represented by bar graphs below each question. In Questions 11 through 13, participants were asked to provide information pertaining to each question.

1. When encountering an elderly driver during a traffic stop, which of the following options are you likely to take?

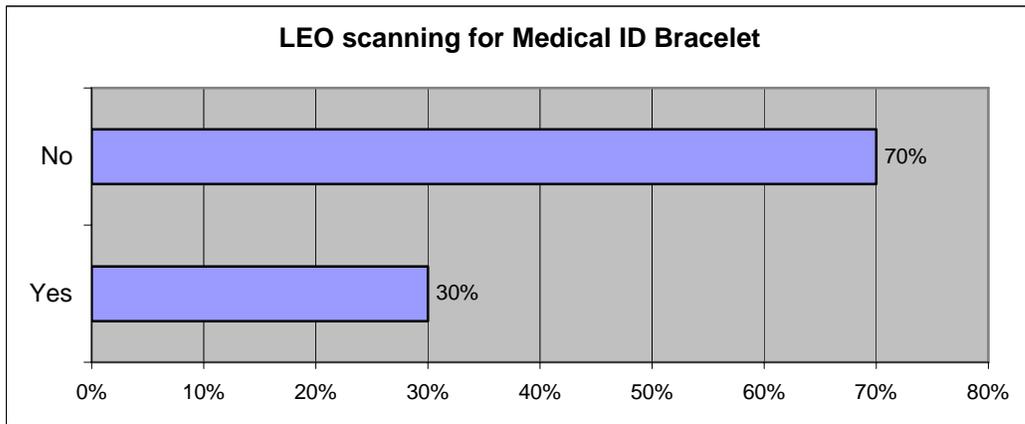


Nine percent of the responding participants were listed in the "other" category because their answers were either not listed in the original question or they provided a combination of the provided answers. Of these participants, some indicated their choice of enforcement option depended upon the circumstances surrounding the traffic stop.

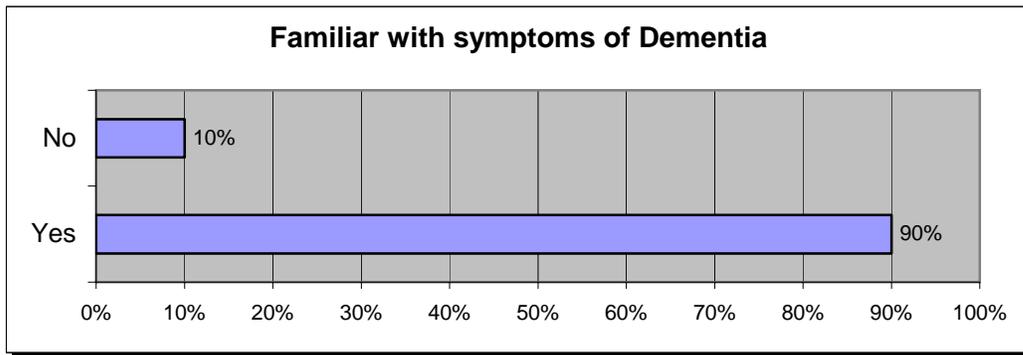
2. During a traffic stop involving an elderly driver, do you regularly ask any of the following?



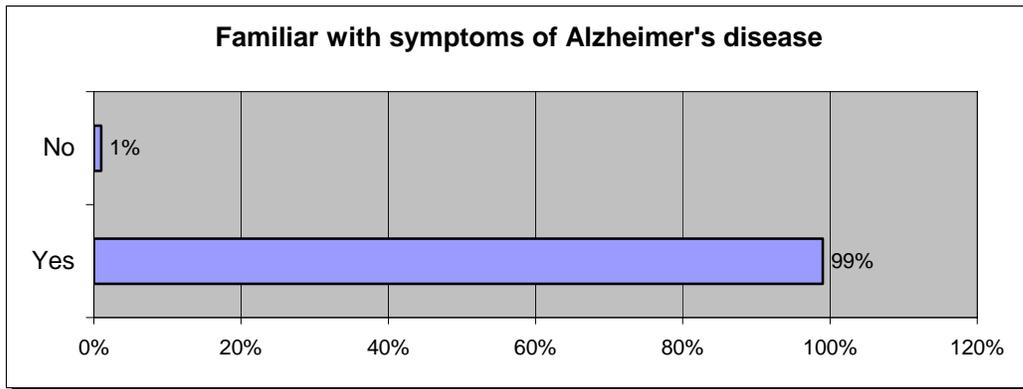
3. During a traffic stop involving an elderly driver, do you regularly look for a medical identification bracelet?



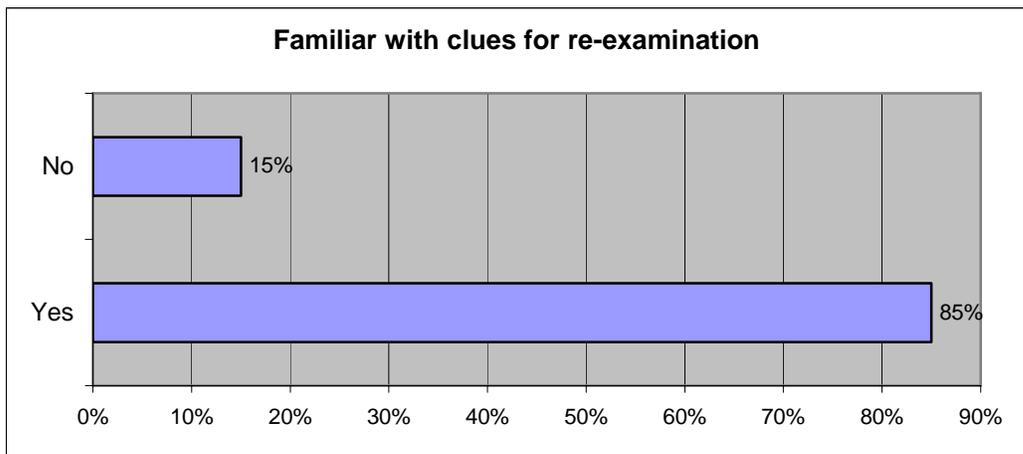
4. Are you familiar with the symptoms of dementia?



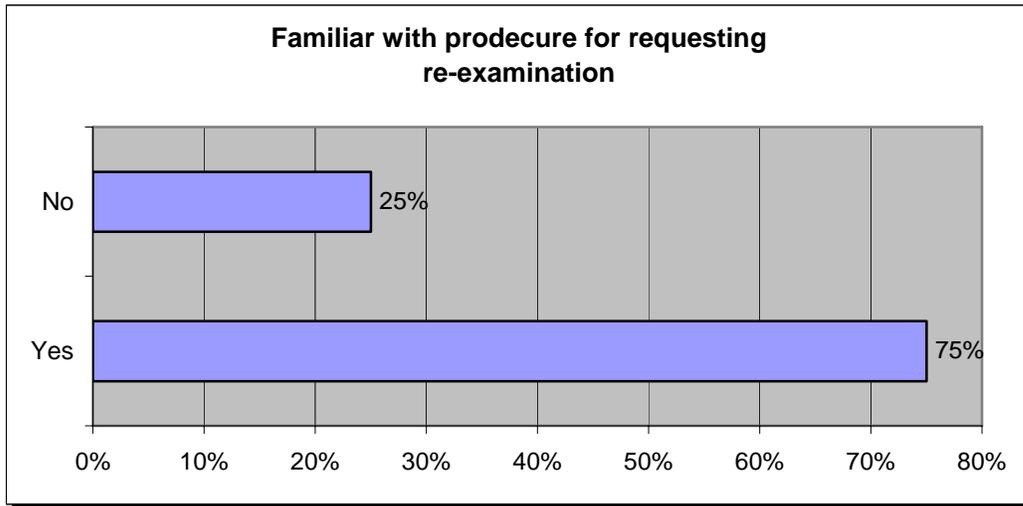
5. Are you familiar with the symptoms of Alzheimer's disease?



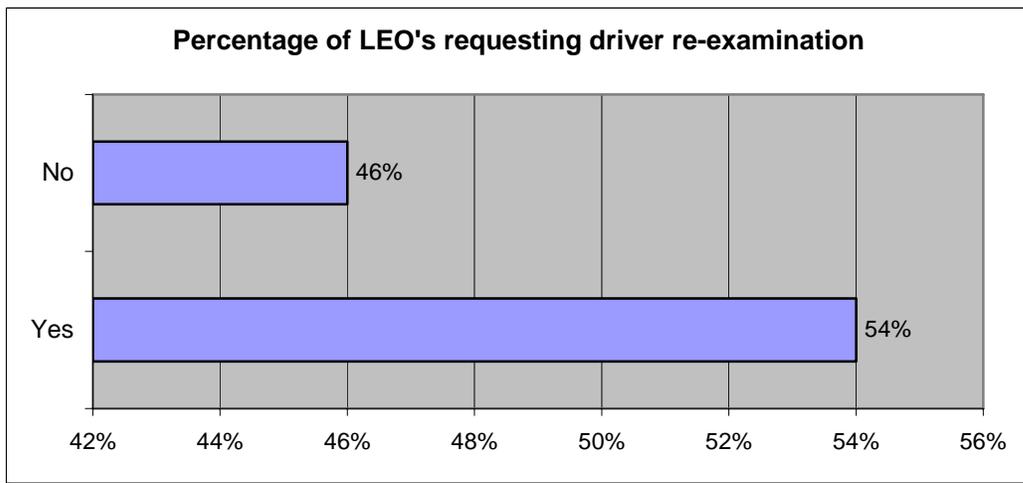
6. Are you familiar with clues indicative of an elderly driver in need of re-examination?



7. Are you familiar with the procedure for requesting the re-examination of elderly drivers who exhibit poor driving skills?

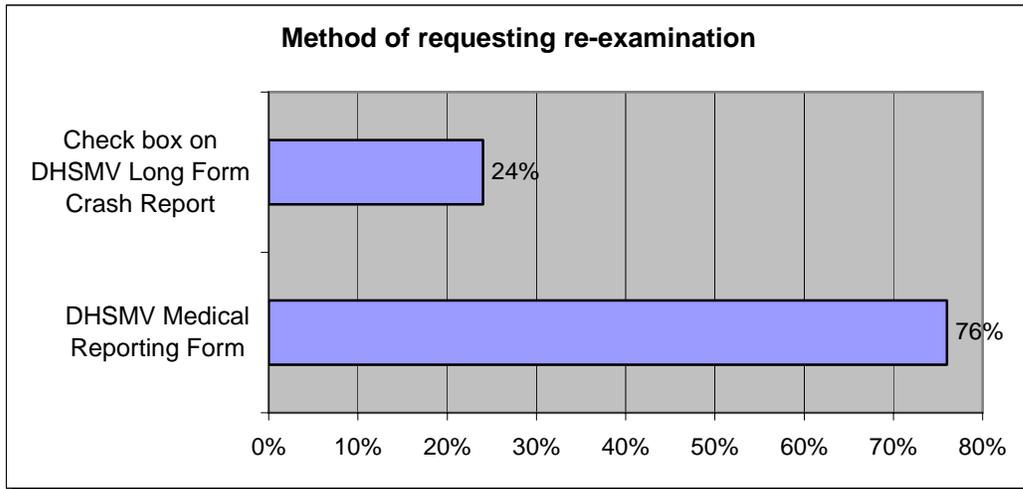


8. Have you requested the re-examination of an elderly driver?



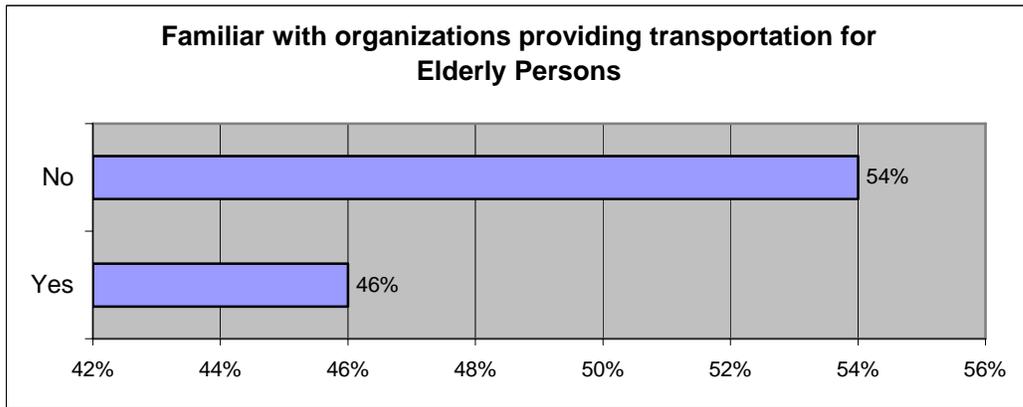
Of the 110 participants responding, 59 had requested the re-examination of elderly drivers. The remaining 41 participants had not requested a re-examination.

9. When requesting the re-examination of an elderly driver, which method was utilized?



The response to the method of requesting re-examination is based on the 59 participants who stated that they had requested a re-examination in Question 8.

10. Are you familiar with local service organizations that assist elderly persons with their transportation needs?



There were 51 participants responding, "yes" when asked if they were familiar with local service organizations providing transportation services for the elderly. These participants were asked to provide information in Questions 11 through 13 in regards to their knowledge of service providers.

11. Do you have any suggestions regarding the identification of “at-risk” elderly drivers?

Respondents to this question had numerous suggestions to identify “at-risk” drivers to include the following:

- Have the DHSMV flag their driver’s license on D.A.V.I.D. as being an “at-risk” driver.
- A “Medical Alert” decal attached to the rear window of a vehicle being driven by an individual diagnosed by a physician with a medical condition that could affect their driving capabilities.
- A specialized license plate identifying a person with a medical or physical condition that may affect their driving.
- Officer training and orientation on indicators of “at-risk” driving behavior and potential physical and medical issues affecting elderly drivers.
- Additional information box on UTT’s (Uniform Traffic Ticket) and Warning Tickets to indicate “at-risk” driver.

12. Do you know of any transportation options available to elderly drivers?

Members of the Lee County Sheriff’s Office participating in this survey identified the following resources available to residents of Lee County.

- Good Wheels, Lee Tran (public transportation)
- Local bus or taxi service
- Churches or Assisted Living Facility transportation
- Family or friends
- Senior Friendship Center

13. Do you know of any alternative methods that might be helpful in dealing with elderly drivers?

There were several suggestions provided by respondents to include the following:

- Re-test ability to drive (motor function, vision) at age 60 and re-test every five years thereafter.
- Screening by physicians, eye doctors, psychiatrists, and elder organizations of elderly persons under their care for conditions indicative of reduced abilities that might impact their driving skills.
- Some type of driver identification bracelet providing pertinent medical information and emergency contact telephone numbers.
- An education campaign to bring this issue to the attention of elderly drivers, their family and friends.
- A laminated reference card for law enforcement officers providing information regarding the clues and symptoms identifying physical and medical conditions common to elderly drivers.
- Check past driving history, i.e. citations and warning tickets.

Discussion

Information provided by the survey participants was extremely useful in assessing the perception of elderly drivers in the eyes of law enforcement officers. It was interesting to learn that approximately 55 percent of officers conducting traffic stops involving elderly drivers chose the issuance of a Warning Citation as the appropriate method of dealing with the traffic infraction. Only 40 percent of officers felt a UTT (Uniform Traffic Ticket) was appropriate. Some of the data gathered in the literature review suggested that often the issuance of a traffic ticket was more appropriate.

A majority of officers queried indicated that they were familiar with symptoms of Alzheimer's disease and dementia and the impact of such medical conditions on elderly drivers. A large percentage of officers also responded that they were familiar with clues indicative of "at-risk" drivers. With this in mind, only 30 percent of the officers regularly looked for the presence of a medical identification bracelet when encountering an elderly driver. As Florida's elderly driving population increases, law enforcement officers will need to be more cognizant of medical and physical indicators displayed by elderly drivers. This can be accomplished by more in-depth questioning during traffic stops.

When queried about re-examination procedures, 75 percent of respondents indicated familiarity with the process; however, only 54 percent had requested re-examinations in the past. This information indicates that most officers are aware of the re-examination option, but almost half of the officers had not utilized the process.

Approximately 46 percent of respondents were able to identify transportation alternatives to address the needs of the elderly. These officers provided the names of numerous service organizations within the community that offer transportation options.

In reviewing the data obtained from the survey, it is clear that the responding officers were well prepared to address the needs of elderly drivers. The data revealed many officers are familiar with medical and physical conditions that can adversely impact the driving ability of elderly drivers. The survey indicated that officers should be more cognizant of drivers with medical identification bracelets. Awareness by officers of service organizations providing transportation for the elderly is also an area that could be improved upon. The officers surveyed provided excellent suggestions for identifying and dealing with elderly drivers. Their observations included training and orientation, public education, partnerships with medical professionals, and "at-risk" driver identification procedures as effective methods to deal with the increase of Florida's elderly driving population.

Recommendations

The increase in Florida's elderly driving population will impact law enforcement agencies throughout the State of Florida. The following recommendations will address the future needs of law enforcement in coping with this issue.

- Development of a training and orientation program for law enforcement officers focusing on recognition, assessment, and resolution of issues facing elderly drivers. A laminated quick-reference card could be provided to law enforcement officers containing information regarding the clues and symptoms identifying physical and medical conditions facing elderly drivers.
- Establish an education campaign geared toward public awareness of future trends in Florida's motoring public. The campaign should address issues of identifying "at-risk" driving behavior. Furthermore, it should provide family, friends, and elderly drivers with the resources necessary to make informed decisions about their transportation needs.
- Conduct a survey of community service providers to determine the resources available to elderly drivers should they make the decision to no longer drive.
The resources identified in the survey should be made available to law enforcement officers, medical professionals, and other caregivers.
- Network with physicians, care givers, clergy, and other community members to establish assessment criteria relating to elderly drivers. This assessment should include methodology to identify "at-risk" drivers and a strategy to report these drivers to the appropriate authorities.
- Provide elderly drivers with resources for personal assessment and driver education courses such as those offered by AARP, AAA, and the Safety Council.

The face of Florida's driving public is changing. It is imperative that law enforcement agencies plan for the future needs of the motoring public.

Lieutenant Donnie Fewell has been with the Lee County Sheriff's Office since 1990. Throughout his career, Donnie has been the Manager of the Sheriff's Office Video Unit, Patrol Sergeant supervising the Traffic Unit and currently is assigned as a Tour Commander in the "Charlie" District. Donnie is pursuing an AS degree from Barry University.

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Appendix A

Law Enforcement and Elderly Drivers – Officer Survey

The following survey has been prepared by Lt. Donald Fewell of the Lee County Sheriff's Office. This instrument will serve as original research data for a Research Paper being presented to Class 12 of the FDLE Senior Leadership Program. The purpose of this survey is to explore the interaction between law enforcement officers and the elderly driving population. Responses will assist in identifying how law enforcement officer perceive issues facing elderly drivers. Your participation is greatly appreciated.

1. When encountering an elderly driver during a traffic stop, which of the following options are you likely to take?
 - a. Issue a UTT (Uniform Traffic Ticket)
 - b. Issue a Warning Citation
 - c. Verbal Warning

2. During a traffic stop involving an elderly driver, do you regularly ask any of the following?
 - a. Where are you coming from?
 - b. Where are you going?
 - c. Both (a) and (b)
 - d. None of the above

3. During a traffic stop involving an elderly driver, do you regularly look for a medical identification bracelet?
 - a. Yes
 - b. No

4. Are you familiar with the symptoms of dementia?
 - a. Yes
 - b. No

5. Are you familiar with the symptoms of Alzheimer's disease?
 - a. Yes
 - b. No

6. Are you familiar with clues indicative of an elderly driver in need of re-examination?
 - a. Yes
 - b. No

7. Are you familiar with the procedure for requesting the re-examination of elderly drivers who exhibit poor driving skills?
 - a. Yes
 - b. No

8. Have you requested the re-examination of an elderly driver?
 - a. Yes
 - b. No

9. When requesting the re-examination of an elderly driver, which method was utilized?
 - a. DHSMV Medical Reporting form
 - b. Check box on DHSMV Long Form Crash Report

10. Are you familiar with local service organizations that assist elderly persons with their transportation needs?
 - a. Yes
 - b. No

11. Do you have any suggestions regarding the identification of “at-risk” elderly drivers?

12. Do you know of any transportation options available to elderly drivers?

13. Do you know of any alternative methods that might be helpful in dealing with elderly drivers?