



Features

Florida Paves the Way for Senior Drivers

Better Highway Markings, Innovative Mass-Transit Programs Lead the Way

By Dale Buss, Contributor

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Look at Florida and see the future of America — at least when it comes to the demographics of aging, anyway. Drawing millions of retirees from the Northeast and Midwest over the past few decades, the Sunshine State has become both a senior haven and a senior heaven, offering an accelerated and exaggerated reflection of a rapidly graying nation.

That also means Florida has been dealing with the problem of infirm and elderly drivers for longer than any other state. Fortunately, the state happens to be on the cutting edge of coping with a motoring population that is dominated in many ways by those age 65 and older.

Yet all of its attention to the issue hasn't guaranteed that Florida is ready to call its efforts successful just yet. "We've had a lot of people working in this arena for a long time," said Selma Sauls, planner and coordinator of the Florida GrandDriver Program for the state Highway Safety & Motor Vehicles Department in Tallahassee.

"But because of the projections and predictions of what we're still going to be dealing with in the future, we really need to work hard right now before our state gets into a crisis situation."

Here's some of what Florida has been doing to aid senior drivers:



Making Roadways Easier To Navigate

Nothing can improve senior driving more than making things easier to see for aging eyes. For this reason, Florida has been making visibility and navigability improvements statewide since at least 1991.

Florida has increased pavement stripes on state highways from 4 inches to 6 inches wide, for example. It has put reflective pavement markings in the middle of roads at just 40-foot intervals; the norm has these markings separated by an 80-foot gap, so this approach makes them much easier to see. Florida has made street-name signs bigger and planted more "advance" street-name signs, placing them 1,000 feet before intersections to give elderly drivers more time to decide if they want to turn — and more room to get into the proper lane.

And, because a higher rate of pedestrian deaths is an unfortunate companion in cities with larger populations of elderly drivers, state officials have placed more "high-emphasis crosswalks" including "refuge islands" in the middle of roadways.

"All of these have been excellent improvements that have really helped our senior driver population," said Kevin Dunn, a district signing and pavement-marking manager for the state, in the Tampa Bay area.

The state is still compiling comprehensive data that officials expect will quantify how much these changes have helped, said Gail Holley, Elder Driver program and research manager for the Florida Department of Transportation.

Launching the GrandDriver Program

The American Association of Motor Vehicle Administrators has developed a model program called GrandDriver to address the challenges faced by senior drivers, as well as the government and not-for-profit agencies who deal with them — and to help them in a coordinated way. Now three states (Florida, Maryland and Virginia) and the District of Columbia have created their own GrandDriver programs based on this model, and others are considering doing the same thing.

"Every agency operates on its own statutory authority and normally doesn't cross over into [areas covered by] the others, so we have to bring all these resources together and make them work for seniors," Sauls said. "Our intent is to produce a seamless system — a one-stop shop for them."

Florida GrandDriver, for example, promotes education and awareness through programs that reach out to senior drivers by providing Web-based information related to driver-safety courses and alternative transportation. The program also provides training to medical, social service and transportation professionals on older-driver issues, and sponsors safety talks at senior centers. Florida GrandDriver also holds events to help older drivers determine if they need to make adjustments to better fit into their cars.

Coordinating Resources

There are so many community-level and pilot projects to improve traffic safety across the state that transportation officials are preparing to survey local governments about everything they're doing. The plan is to then put it all together in a database from which everyone can learn the most effective ways to deal with aging motorists.

"It's important that we not re-create the wheel as we deal with this problem," Holley said. "And there are already a lot of good programs out there."

At the same time, it's important to help Florida's drivers avoid becoming overwhelmed by the many initiatives and organizations that are reaching out to help them through their twilight driving years. This is an especially acute need because general cognitive decline — and, thus, someone's capability to sort through all the choices — accompanies aging.

"As the aging population grows so, too, do the number of tools for driver-skill assessments and information on driving, and we want people to have one, credible source of information and of support," Sauls said. "We want to be able to help everyone come up with their driving-retirement plan."

Easing the Use of Mass Transit

Improving mass transit specifically for senior passengers has long been a broad aim of the state's transportation officials. Since the elderly carry a great deal of political clout in Florida, many cities have done a pretty good job of addressing their needs.

In Palm Beach County, for example, Palm Tran, the public transportation agency, extends and adapts its services to seniors' needs and demands in several ways. A senior-citizen discount — to 60 cents from the regular \$1.25 single fare, for riders 65 years old and older — is only the most obvious.

One of the more innovative Palm Tran programs involves sending out an agency representative to meet with small groups of seniors who are new riders and who might be gathered by, say, their condominium association. The rep shows the eager elderly students the basics of how to use the bus system. They are told how to dress comfortably for their bus ride, when to let the driver know they want to get off, and why it's important to use a buddy system if you're a new rider.

"These are things that the regular transit rider would be well aware of," said Jessica Dumars, a spokeswoman for Palm Tran. "But these are things that seniors might not be aware of, or uneasy about doing. So it helps to show them the ropes."

Below are links to all of the installments in this series.

[What Should We Do About Grandma's Driving?](#)

[Aging Drivers: Intersections Are Danger Zones](#)

[How To Improve Seniors' Driving Skills](#)

[Better Cars, Equipment Assist Senior Drivers](#)

[When It's Time To Hang Up the Keys](#)

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