

There comes a time to let go of the steering wheel

By Ellen Waldman

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Think about how hard it might be if you had to stop driving. Yet this scenario happens every day and, in only a very few exceptions, causes a great deal of resistance and anxiety. Not to mention the general unwillingness to believe that there is anything the matter with how you drive. In most cases, losing your driving privilege is due to either medical frailty or some form of cognitive impairment. Whatever the cause, it doesn't sit too well with most people. Families really struggle with this one.

Recently a woman in her late 80s who had been diagnosed with dementia and had two fender benders insisted that she had been driving for 60 years and was not going to stop now. Of course she had been driving for a lot longer than that, but this is how she computed it. How to get the keys from someone is a really big deal. Here are some programs and assistance early in the process to see if you can keep driving, or if it's time to "hand 'em over" and make other arrangements to get around. (I'll address those options in another column).

The AARP Smart Driver™ Course (aarpdriversafety.org) is the nation's first and largest refresher course for drivers age 50 and older. From their website, the approved curriculum includes: defensive driving techniques; motor vehicle laws; influence of medication on driving ability, fatigue, alcohol and drug use, visual and auditory limitations, and aging. It's a minimum of six hours instructional time and certificates are given to participants who successfully complete the course. The price is \$17.95 to \$21.95, based on AARP membership. Participants may qualify for auto insurance discounts upon completion of the course.

For those who prefer in-person classes, here are the dates for the next ones locally:

- 12:30 p.m. Thursday, Dec. 4 and 11, Medford Senior Center, 510 E Main St., Medford; 541-772-2273.
- 1:30 p.m. Thursday and Friday, Feb. 5 and 6, Providence Medford Medical Center, 840 Royal Ave., Medford; 541-770-6522.

All classes are six hours total.

In addition, the Ashland YMCA (541-482-9622) often holds these classes, but none are scheduled in the near future. Check with them (www.ashlandymca.org, 541-482-9622) to find out when this will be offered next.

The Providence Driver Assessment (541-732-5686) is another wonderful service available here. This can help determine if it is safe for someone to continue driving. An on-the-road driving test is not part of the evaluation. It can ease concerns about drivers who experience health-related incidents or declining health but who wish to continue driving. An occupational therapist works with each client to determine driver safety.

The assessment includes: review of the client's driving history, visual screening, physical screening to measure range of motion, strength and coordination, cognitive and perceptual screening and evaluation of functional mobility. This does require a doctor's referral and no insurance will pay for this test. The cost is \$325. Keep in mind that they cannot tell you that you can't drive. They can only point out the weak areas, if there are any, and why it might not be the best idea to keep driving. This is not a pass/fail test. The results will be reported to the doctor who then might restrict your driving.

It's also possible to also work directly with the DMV. They have information both online and at the local office at 600 Tolman Creek Road (541-776-6092). If you, a doctor, a facility or anyone has concerns that someone should stop driving but won't, check out the DMV's Medically At-Risk Driver Program (oregon.gov/ODOT/DMV, then go to the Voluntary Reporting page). You can also call the DMV At-Risk Driver Program at 503-945-5295. You can request that this be done confidentially, so no one will feel afraid to be the "bad guy" here.

For a driver with a condition or limitation that impedes their ability, you can go to the DMV office and fill out a Driver Evaluation Request (Form 735-6066), or you can download a copy and then submit it by mail or in person. You might just save someone from causing harm to themselves or others on the road.

Someone told me that "driving is my life" when he was losing his license. He made it sound like this might in fact end his desire to be alive. We can see how autonomy, independence, freedom — all those aspects of being who we are — gets severely challenged with this news. It might be a good idea to consider how you would cope with this, should it happen to you or someone you know. Let's hope there is another way to remain feeling like the authentic person you really are, even without a driver's license.