

# SAFETY SENSE

## Study: Older Driver Fatalities On The Rise

(NAPS)—According to experts, overall highway fatalities are declining nationwide. Unfortunately, the number of older drivers—aged 70 and above—involved in fatal crashes continues to rise.

A new study by The Road Information Program (TRIP), a non-profit transportation research group based in Washington, D.C., shows that the number of older drivers involved in traffic fatalities increased from 3,719 in 1989 to 4,934 in 1999, a 33 percent increase. At the same time, overall traffic fatalities dropped from 45,582 in 1989 to 41,345 in 1999—a nine percent decrease.

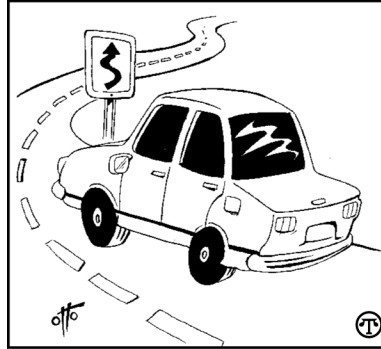
The TRIP report, “Traffic Safety and Older Americans: Making Roads Safer for Motorists,” also identified specific roadway improvements that can help reduce older driver fatalities. Among those improvements are clearer signage and larger lettering on signs; overhead indicators for turning lanes; better street lighting; and turn lanes of adequate width at intersections.

“It makes sense to improve lighting, have better signage and separate left-turn lanes with adequate width at intersections because those improvements help address problem areas that older drivers have,” said William M. Wilkins, TRIP’s executive director.

The TRIP report also identified the number of older driver fatalities on a state-by-state basis. The states with the highest number of older driver fatalities are Florida, California, Texas, Pennsylvania, New York, Michigan, North Carolina, Ohio, Missouri, Georgia and Illinois.

Recent federal reports on the needs of older drivers have found that the aging process gradually leads to reduced visual acuity, slower reaction times, losses in information processing ability and reduced neck and upper body flexibility. Problems for older drivers often come at intersections, merging and weaving and interpreting a variety of traffic signs and signals. In fact, for drivers aged 80 and above, more than half of all fatal accidents occur at intersections, compared to one in four for drivers less than 50 years old.

Wilkins said making needed roadway safety improvements will



**For older Americans, improvements in road conditions and markers may help reduce fatal traffic accidents.**

become increasingly important in the years ahead.

“As our nation’s population continues to age in the years ahead, it will become increasingly important that we make the kind of roadway safety improvements that can help reduce accidents and save the lives of all drivers as well as older drivers,” he said.

Dennis “Chip” Sterndahl, president of Sterndahl Enterprises, Inc., in Sun Valley, CA who also is president of the American Traffic Safety Services Association, said the latest reflective and visual technology and products such as signs, strips and guardrails are helping to make a difference.

Based primarily on its analysis of the 1998 Federal Highway Administration report, “Older Driver Highway Design Handbook,” TRIP recommends the following safety improvements for improving older driver safety:

- Signage and lighting: clearer and less complex signage that is easier to follow; larger lettering on signs; and better street lighting, particularly at intersections.

- Intersections: bright, luminous lane markings; overhead indicators for turning lanes; overhead street signs on both sides; and add or expand left-turn lanes and make sure they are adequate in length.

- Streets and highways: wider lanes and shoulders, particularly at intersections and curves, to reduce consequences of driving mistakes; longer merge and exit lanes; rumble strips to warn motorists when they are running off roads; and periodic passing lanes on busy two-lane roads.