

TRANSPORTATION CROSSROAD

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Definition

This CrossRoad will discuss the different transportation services available to the older adult you are caring for to help him/her remain independent and safe while traveling.

Glossary of Terms

A list of terms you may come across while researching this topic

Search Our Database

On the Navigating the CrossRoads main page you will find a drop down menu of pre-populated search terms that will bring you to a list of Central Massachusetts agencies and programs that relate to this topic. You may also [CLICK HERE](#) to go to our Guide to Elder Services, an online searchable database, to do more extensive searches or for results in a specific zip code, city/town or Central Massachusetts geographic region. ***If you are unable to find a keyword on the pre-populated list and it consists of two terms, transpose the order of the terms i.e. to search for Medical Transportation use the keyword Transportation, Medical.*

Helpful Links

A list of outside websites to visit for further information.

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This information was written with older adults in mind and is meant to provide a general overview of transportation options for older adults. The information provided does not discuss every aspect of this topic. This information does not constitute legal nor medical advice. We encourage you to consult with competent professional and/or legal representatives for advice.

Introduction

Getting from one place to another is something most of us do every day without much thought. Our ability to independently transport ourselves is a milestone in our teen years that we generally take for granted until a decline in our abilities appears or a crisis arises. We get used to doing what we want, when we want, and relying upon ourselves. But there may come a time when an older adult begins to have difficulty or is no longer able to travel independently, such as walking to the local bus stop, utilizing train services or driving. These transportation challenges may require everything in the older adult's life to be planned and arranged in advance. More than that, suddenly the older adult is reliant upon someone else to be available for many of his/her previously independent activities. If the older adult or you begin to notice changes in his/her abilities to independently manage transportation, it may be time to consider community programs. There are many different types of resources available that range from assessing the older adult's ability to travel to providing rides.

Getting A Handicap Placard/Plate

In Massachusetts there are special placards and plates that are available for vehicles that transport individuals who are Massachusetts residents and who are considered to be a driver or passenger with a medical disability. Handicapped Placards and Plates provide the owner or operator of a vehicle to park in spaces designated for persons with a disability. If the older adult you are caring for is still able to drive safely, but has either a permanent or temporary disability, he/she MAY be eligible for a handicap placard or license plate. The older adult in your life who has never driven or cannot drive on a temporary or permanent basis is eligible to apply for a special placard or plate that can be used in the vehicle that they are a passenger. The application for a handicap placard or plate has two parts: one to be completed by the older adult and one to be completed by the older adult's physician. You should be aware that certain medical conditions automatically disqualify someone from holding a driver's license. There is also a special handicap placard or plate for veterans who have a disability. These applications are available online. [CLICK HERE](#) to visit the Massachusetts Department of Transportation's website for more information.

Improving The Older Adult's Safety While Driving Independently

Below review safety steps that may be utilized if the older adult is still driving.

Assessments And Evaluation

The older adult should complete regular self-assessments regarding his/her ability to drive. If the older adult notices eyesight and/or hearing changes it may be time for a medical check-up. Together the older adult, caregivers, relatives, and friends may complete an evaluation of his/her recent driving. This involves inquiring if there have been recent vehicle crashes, new dents in his/her car, comments by friends or neighbors about his/her driving, traffic tickets, warnings, collisions, or near collisions (in the last two years), and getting lost on familiar streets. If you or the older adult feels another informal evaluation might be helpful, the older adult could drive you, a relative, a friend, or a neighbor around while you observe for driving mistakes or challenges the older driver may be experiencing.

If someone feels that further evaluations or steps need to be taken, there are computerized or online evaluations and tools the older adult can use. These evaluations are meant to train an older adult's brain to be more alert while driving. Some community driver safety programs offer an in-depth evaluation tool that retrains an older adult's brain to take in more essential information. These tools may strengthen the cognitive skills necessary for safe driving by having the older adult simulate driving skills. These programs attempt to expand and improve the older adult's field of vision, processing speed, and reaction time. Some of these programs are able to offer an objective evaluation of an older adult's driving and expose any potential problems. Studies have found that

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older adults who actively participated in these tools have had a 50% reduction in at-fault car crashes compared to older adults who have not participated.

State certified driver refresher courses are also a good idea to increase an older adult's safety while operating a motor vehicle. There are programs specifically designed for people over the age of 50. These classes teach defensive driving techniques, how age related changes can affect one's driving, and more. If the older adult completes this program, some automobile insurance companies offer rate reductions. You may be able to find other courses and refresher resources at the older adult's local auto club. AARP offers an online driver safety course for individuals over the age of 50. [CLICK HERE](#) to visit the AARP website for more information. American Automobile Association (AAA) also offers an online driver review course. The program will review the skills needed to be a safe driver and provide the older adult with a score at the end. These scores are private and do not need to be shared with any other individuals. [CLICK HERE](#) to visit the AAA website for more information. As the older adult is participating in driving evaluations it is important to keep track of the results and monitor any changes that may occur from one evaluation to the next. It may be helpful to perform evaluations on a yearly basis to monitor changes as they happen. Also, be aware that in Massachusetts drivers 75 years of age and older must renew their license in person and pass a vision test.

Vehicle Adjustments And Conversions

The older adult can make certain adjustments to his/her car that will allow him/her to continue to drive safely. These adjustments include:

- Visor extender to reduce glare from the sun
- Convex (extended) side-view mirrors to increase peripheral vision to decrease blind spots and reduce body rotation
- Convex rear-view mirror to increase peripheral vision to decrease blind spots and reduce body rotation
- Safety belt pad to add more padding and comfort to the safety belt
- Pedal extenders to make pedals closer to the driver (good for people of short stature)
- Support handle placed on the outside of the car to assist the older adult when entering and exiting the car
- Ceiling hand grip placed above the driver door to assist the older adult when entering and exiting the car
- Ribbon tied on the safety belt to make it easier to grab and therefore more accessible
- Seat cushion to raise the upper body so the older adult can see over the steering wheel, dashboard, and hood of the car
- Safety belt extender to allow a safety belt lock to be higher away from the seat, making it easier to fasten the safety belt
- Safety belt adjuster to make the safety belt easier to reach and fasten
- Key extender to allow the older adult to turn on the ignition without much wrist turning

[CLICK HERE](#) to visit the University of Massachusetts Boston, Gerontology Institute website for more information on vehicle adjustments.

If you, as the caregiver, or the older adult, have concerns about his/her driving abilities making simple changes may increase safety. Driving during the daylight instead of at night is one change the older adult could make. The older adult may want to avoid driving during hours of the day that traffic is high and the roads are congested. If his/her schedule allows it, the older adult may drive during "off peak" traffic hours. In order to prevent getting lost or confused, the older adult could stay on familiar and regular roads and routes. The older adult may want to avoid high speed roads such as the highway. If the older adult regularly drives for long periods of time, he/she may want to break the long trips up and drive for shorter periods of time.

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If there are still concerns about the older adult's driving safety after vehicle adaptations and driving habits have been altered, the older adult may choose to talk to a driver rehabilitation specialist. Driver rehabilitation specialists are usually occupational therapists trained in the assessment and improvement of an adult's driving skills. Often they are certified by the state and working in driver education programs.

When To Stop Driving

If you have driven with the older adult for many years, it may be difficult to notice the gradual decrease in his/her driving safety. In addition, gradual decreases in physical and cognitive conditions may NOT be apparent until a crisis occurs. However, there are some warning signs of impaired driving that the older adult, you, relatives, and friends should keep an eye out for. If some of these signs are noticed, it is time to start the conversation with the older adult about their ability to continue safe driving:

- Decrease in confidence while driving
- Difficulty turning to see while backing up
- Riding the brake
- Easily distracted
- Other drivers honk their horns often
- Incorrect signaling
- Inappropriate parking
- Hitting the side of the road/curb
- Scrapes or dents on the car, mailbox, or garage
- Increased agitation or irritation while driving
- Failure to notice important activity on the side of the road
- Failure to notice traffic signs
- Trouble navigating turns
- Driving at inappropriate speeds
- Not anticipating the possibility of dangerous situations
- Needs a "copilot"
- Bad judgment while making turns
- Close collisions
- Slow response to unexpected situations
- Moving into wrong lane/side of the road
- Trouble staying in his/her own lane
- Confusion at exits
- Ticketed violations or warnings
- Getting lost in familiar places
- Getting into an accident
- Failure to stop at a stop sign or red light
- Confusion about gas and brake pedals
- Stopping in the middle of traffic for no reason

If the older adult you are caring for has certain impairments or medical challenges, then you may want to begin encouraging alternative modes of transportation. These medical challenges include (*the below list MAY NOT be complete*):

- Cataracts
- Seizures
- Macular Degeneration
- Parkinson's Disease
- Glaucoma

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- Arthritis
- Alzheimer's Disease
- Has had a stroke
- Illnesses or medications that cause a decline in perception, mobility, and understanding
- Poor vision
- Problems with depth perception
- Hearing problems
- Memory and/or cognitive problems
- Disorientation
- Reduced mobility
- Physical weakness
- Neuropathy
- Drowsiness and fatigue
- Poor concentration
- Lack of awareness and judgment

If the older adult does not believe that his/her medical condition is a driving safety hazard, asking his/her physician(s) for a note or prescription that says "no driving" may be beneficial. Any of the older adult's physician(s) who have concerns about his/her driving safety can file a report with the Registry of Motor Vehicles (RMV).

Making The Transition

A conversation with the older adult about his/her transportation challenges will be sensitive and may prove difficult. Making the decision to limit or stop driving is a significant life change. When the time comes to have a conversation with the older adult about reducing or no longer driving, it is important to stay supportive. The older adult will most likely want to keep his/her independence. With this in mind, you may want to approach the older adult with neutral and non-threatening statements to make the conversation more comfortable. This way the older adult may feel like it is a more open conversation and less threatening.

There are a few important things to think about when you begin the conversation with the older adult. If you are driving with the older adult and notice his/her driving ability has declined, do not bring up the conversation in the car. Remember that this can be an upsetting topic for an older adult, and may cause him/her to become very distracted while he/she is driving. It is also important to enlighten the older adult about why you feel this conversation and change are necessary. This may mean having to bring up recent accidents, tickets, or confusion with directions. If the older adult does not want to have the conversation that day, try starting it again in a few days or a week. If he/she sees that you are seriously concerned about his/her driving safety, the older adult may be more willing to sit down with you. If the older adult gets defensive or brings up different concerns about reducing or stopping his/her driving, listen and be supportive. Remind the older adult that you will not only do everything you can to preserve his/her independence and mobility, but you are also trying to ensure the safety of him/her and others.

The older adult you are caring for may disagree with your opinion regarding driving restrictions. They may be willing to adhere to some driving restrictions but refuse to cease driving. If the older adult's driving ability has gradually diminished it may be difficult for them to realize the extent of the decline. The older adult may still refuse to reduce or stop driving after you have discussed alternative transportation options and physicians, local police, and/or the RMV have been involved. You and his/her family and friends may be forced to take control of the situation. If this is the situation you face, there are few things you can do to prevent the older adult from driving. You can:

- Hide the car keys

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- Make the car keys unusable (i.e. filing them down)
- Make a fake copy of the car keys
- Disable the car (i.e. removing the battery, starter wire, or distributor cap)

****Caregiver Hint:** *If these steps still do not work and the older adult will not stop driving, you may want to take other measures. If the older adult still legally owns the car, you must respect his/her legal rights. If you can convince the older adult to sell his/her car the money he/she gets for the sale as well as the money saved from maintenance, insurance, and gas may pay for long-term public transportation and taxis.*

Although the state of Massachusetts does not require physicians and other individuals to report an unsafe driver to the Registry of Motor Vehicles (RMV), the Medical Affairs of the RMV does accept voluntary third party reports. If the RMV feels the report is valid, the older adult might be contacted by the RMV to take a “competency road examination” or an “assessment for adaptive equipment and appropriate license restrictions”. If the older adult does not pass these two tests or fails to take them, he/she may have his/her license involuntarily suspended or indefinitely revoked.

Alternative Options

Before you begin the conversation with the older adult about limiting or stopping driving, you should have a list of alternative transportation options. The list of options should include both informal and formal options so the older adult has many different choices. You may want to give the older adult a list of people (friends, relatives, neighbors etc) who are willing to provide transportation to the places he/she needs to go. When you give the older adult the list, include names, phone numbers, and days/times the people are available to drive the older adult. If the list has several people on it, the older adult may be more apt to use it because the burden is not only being placed on a few individuals.

You can also limit the older adult’s driving or need to drive by having services delivered to his/her home. For example, there are several different opportunities to have groceries, meals, and prescriptions delivered to the older adult’s home. If the older adult is able to get these important items delivered to his/her house, the older adult will have fewer needs to drive. The costs of having these goods delivered will vary and the older adult may have to pay for them out of pocket.

If public transportation is available and easily accessible in the place where the older adult lives, this is another low-cost alternative option. You should ride the routes alone first to see if there are possible hazards (no places to sit, inaccessible sidewalks, no covered seating area etc). If the older adult is not familiar with bus and train usage then you may want to print out route maps and schedules. You may want to accompany him/her the first couple of times to increase confidence levels. Also some public transportation agencies may have travel trainers available to assist you and the older adult in learning the different routes and rules of public transportation. If the fixed route public transportation is not accessible to the older adult because of a physical or mental disability then you may want to consider applying for Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) transportation. The older adult needs to apply with the Regional Transportation Agency (RTA). The application process requires input from one of the older adult’s doctors. Many cities/towns also have a shuttle service for older adults that can provide a variety of services. In addition, many taxicab companies are now offering discounts for older adult passengers as well as offering wheelchair accessible rides.

For-profit and not-for-profit organizations offer a variety of transportation services. Religious groups, organizations that deal with a specific illness, and other non-profit groups may offer subsidized or free

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transportation services. For-profit transportation services tend to offer more flexibility but often at greater cost. They may also be more willing to accommodate transportation needs on short notice, during unconventional times, or for long distance travel. These organizations are also more likely to be able to provide individual instead of group transportation options.

For-profit and not-for-profit transportation organizations may vary in the types of services they provide and the way they provide it. The vehicles they use may have a fixed route or pickup may need to be scheduled in advance. In addition, some organizations and services will only serve a limited geographic area while others serve a larger area. Transportation services are used by many older adults and can be provided for an individual or in a group setting. The services also vary on how the older adult will be picked up. Some transportation programs offer door-to-door services where staff will help the older adult from the door of his/her home into the vehicle and from that vehicle to the door of his/her destination. Other organizations only offer curb-to-curb pickup and drop off. For these services, the older adult must stand on the curb waiting for the transporting vehicle to arrive and then must be able to get him/herself in and out of the vehicle without assistance. With this kind of service, the transportation staff cannot go into the home of the older adult, nor help him/her in and out of the vehicle or to the door of his/her home or destination because of legal liability.

Fee structures vary widely. Curb-to-curb services are usually less costly than door-to-door services. There may be charges for any waiting time at pick-up, loading fees, pickup fees, and the amount of miles transported. Consulting local community members, including those at your local council on aging or senior center can be valuable resources for information about transportation options. In addition, the older adult may have to pay out of pocket for these services. Some limited services, however, MAY be covered by the older adult's insurance. These rides usually have to be health related.

Questions To Ask When Exploring Different Transportation Options

If the older adult you are caring for is capable of using any transportation services, you and he/she should inquire about the following things:

- If the older adult is in a wheelchair, will the services be able to accommodate his/her wheelchair? If not are there other wheelchair accessible vehicles in his/her area? Will wheelchair accessible vehicles be more costly?
- Are there certain restrictions on these services? Some organizations provide services only for specific groups of individuals or reasons. For example, the American Cancer Society provides transportation to only individuals with cancer.
- Does the older adult's local council on aging or senior center have shuttle or van services? Many councils on aging or senior centers have shuttles and vans that can pick up older adults and bring them to the senior center, shopping locations, hospital/medical appointments, banks etc.
- Does the service travel outside the older adult's city/town? If so, which surrounding cities/towns are covered? If the services do extend beyond his/her city/town, there may be extra fees.
- Does the service require a minimum amount of time or distance traveled? If a service does have this limit, make sure it makes sense for the older adult to still use it.
- Do they offer transportation to any destination? There are also services that only provide transportation for medical appointments or medical related reasons. However, other services have no restrictions and will bring the older adult to go shopping, visit with a friend, etc.
- Are reservations required? Reservation requirements are different for every service. The older adult may need to make a reservation well in advance or call the morning that he/she needs a ride. Other services allow the older adult to just arrive at the pick-up location and time.

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- If the older adult resides in a long-term care facility (rest home, nursing home, Continued Care Retirement Community, etc), or subsidized housing (public housing authority building), do they have transportation options available?

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