

Coaxing Seniors Out From Behind the Wheel

**As Driving Population Ages,
Growing Number of Programs
Offer Incentives -- and a Lift**

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With the number of older -- and less safe -- drivers growing, dozens of new transportation programs are springing up around the country to make it easier for elderly people to give up their car keys.

The efforts go well beyond the "dial-a-ride" vans that take senior citizens to see their doctors, and they offer more independence and flexibility than traditional options have. ITNAmerica, a nonprofit based in Portland, Maine, has drivers available around the clock, seven days a week, to take older adults wherever they want to go -- for a fee averaging \$8 per trip -- and help load and unload their shopping bags, walkers or wheelchairs. Seniors can even trade in their cars and get credit toward trips.

In Atlanta, people ages 60 and over can buy vouchers to reduce the cost of rides. Another new program in Oklahoma City uses the limousines of adult day-care centers at times of the day when the limos are idle. At the same time, several state legislatures are easing regulations that can get in the way of efforts to create new transportation options for older adults.



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The number of older drivers is on the rise nationwide. More programs are offering innovative transportation alternatives.

The need for new programs is urgent. With the gap between so-called driving expectancy and life expectancy increasing, large numbers of the country's 78 million baby boomers may try to continue driving even when their skills and senses falter. The annual number of fatal crashes caused by older drivers is expected to more than double by 2030, according to the Insurance Institute for Highway Safety in Arlington, Va. Drivers who are at least 65 years old are expected to account for 16% of all crashes and 25% of all fatal crashes by 2030. Drivers who are 75 and older have higher crash rates per mile traveled than all groups but 16- to 18-year-olds. And bodily-injury liability claims nearly double for drivers who are 85 and older, meaning that they are more often at fault in crashes than younger drivers, according to the insurance institute.

There is an emotional toll as well. Already, more than half of Americans age 65 or older who can't drive -- almost four million people -- stay home on any given day because they lack transportation, according to the Surface Transportation Policy Project, a Washington nonprofit group. The limbo in which former drivers find themselves can last years, according to 2002 research by the National Institute on Aging in Bethesda, Md. Older men who stop driving become dependent on alternative transportation for six years on average; older women need help for 10 years. Former drivers also report higher levels of depression than active drivers, the University of California Traffic Safety Center reported last year.

All this has fueled "a groundswell" in new transportation options, says Helen Kerschner, chief executive of the Beverly Foundation in Pasadena, Calif., which has studied transportation options for older people since 1999.

GETTING AROUND

[Here are some examples](#) of grassroots groups around the country helping older people who no longer drive get to doctor's appointments, stores, volunteer work and social engagements.

Perhaps the most successful driving program to date is Maine's ITN. In 1988, Katherine Freund's three-year-old son was run over by a car and nearly killed. The driver was 84 years old. That near-tragedy prompted her to develop ITN (for "Independent Transportation Network"), and after applying for grants, she got the first car on the road in 1995. Since then, the group has provided 160,000 rides. Last year, it made 15,250 trips, using four donated cars, and served 600 riders.

Two years ago, June E. Snow grew uneasy driving her 1988 Ford Tempo during Maine's icy winters, so she got rid of her car. The 80-year-old Falmouth resident now uses ITN's Portland program to go to the grocery store and doctor's office. "If I didn't have ITN, I don't know what I'd do," she says. "Pride gets in the way of asking your friends to drive you around."

With ITN as a backdrop, U.S. Sen. Susan Collins, a Maine Republican, is drafting a bill to develop more sweeping "transportation alternatives" to allow older Americans to remain active and independent and tap private resources to do so.

The "Older Americans Sustainable Mobility Act" would create a tax deduction for senior citizens who donate their cars to a transportation program -- and also would require that they get financial credit toward future rides with the same program. The bill also would provide five years of grants for developing and expanding driving programs patterned after ITN's Portland service.

Already, several state legislatures are easing rules to help create new transportation options. Maine passed a law last year that made it simpler for nonprofits to let older people trade in their cars for transportation service. In Connecticut, a new law provides matching public money for communities that start efforts modeled on the Maine network. Rhode Island is considering versions of both laws.

Most of the programs rely on volunteer drivers. But in North Hollywood, Calif., a federally funded pilot project is starting this month that allows older adults to hire friends and family members to drive them around, and then passes reimbursement to the drivers through the riders. That way, "the service doesn't have to schedule rides or recruit volunteers, because the relationship is between the rider and the driver," says Dr. Kerschner of the Beverly Foundation, which is coordinating the project and hopes to expand it throughout the Los Angeles area.

The biggest barriers to alternative transportation efforts so far are lack of funding, volunteer drivers' fears that their car-insurance premiums will go up, and nonprofits' fears about liability, says Dr. Kerschner. In groups trying to start a program in which volunteers help riders in and out of the car, and into their homes, "someone always asks, 'What about liability?'" And the conversation may stop right there."

To that end, the Beverly Foundation has put together a "TurnKey Kit" for start-up efforts designed to provide practical "how-to" assistance. The materials include a business-plan template, community-survey instrument, and other advice -- with a section on liability protection to be added this year. Dr. Kerschner urges new groups to meet "the beauty-shop test": "We have to help people go to the library, volunteer activities, all kinds of things that they have been doing that indicate that they're still vital -- and that there's more to life than just going to the doctor."

Not every program is geared to getting older drivers off the road. To extend their years behind the wheel, growing numbers of older people are seeking help from the country's 300-plus driver-rehabilitation specialists. These individuals work primarily through hospitals' occupational-therapy programs to help drivers compensate for impairments, often caused by conditions such as strokes or arthritis.

And Sandra Rosenbloom, a University of Arizona professor, says that getting aging boomers out of their cars will take more than volunteer drivers. She suggests prodding people into car-sharing programs -- and reworking public transit to serve them better. "There are communities in Florida where a bus service makes a loop every hour a few days a week," she says.

Getting Around

Several hundred grassroots groups around the country are helping older people who no longer drive get to doctor's appointments, stores, volunteer work and social engagements. Here are some examples:

NAME/LOCATION	TYPE OF SERVICE	COST	COMMENT
ITNAmerica Portland, Maine www.itnamerica.org 207-854-0505	Membership service	\$8 average per trip	Members can trade in cars to get credit; service is available around the clock seven days a week.
Volunteer Friends North Hollywood, Calif. www.beverlyfoundation.org 626-792-2292	Reimbursement to friends or family	Free	Pilot is starting up and hopes to expand in Los Angeles; low administration cost expected since riders recruit drivers and reimburse them with program funds.
Ride Connection Inc. Portland, Ore. www.rideconnection.org 503-528-1720	Mobility manager	Free (donations accepted)	Public-transit service funded this nonprofit, which connects riders with more than 30 transportation providers; concierges escort some riders.
Seniors' Resource Center Denver www.srcaging.org 303-238-8151	Ride brokerage	Free (donations accepted)	SRC determines what transportation is needed to keep client independent; started a volunteer-driver program 18 months ago and is ramping up to 600 drivers and 50,000 rides a year.
Agging Atlanta, Atlanta www.agingatlanta.com 404-463-3224	Vouchers	\$15 average per trip	Riders pay \$10 for a \$100 voucher book and negotiate with providers. Customer satisfaction spiked in last year's pilot. Adult day-care center that uses limos early and late in the day for its own clients offers rides to other seniors in between.
Daily Living Centers Inc. Oklahoma City www.dailylivingcenters.org 405-949-1197	Limousine service	Riders pay what they can	Adult day-care center that uses limos early and late in the day for its own clients offers rides to other seniors in between.

NOTE: ITNAmerica plans to add programs later this year in Princeton, N.J.; Charleston, S.C.; Orlando, Fla.; and Santa Monica, Calif.

Sources: Beverly Foundation; the programs

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