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Talking Transportation: The Effort to Keep Seniors Mobile When They Stop Driving

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When you think of the AARP, the American Association of Retired Persons, you probably conjure up thoughts of senior discounts, health insurance and retirement. So it might surprise you to learn that they're also actively engaged in driver safety and promoting access to mass transit. The statistics on these issues they shared with me are quite interesting.

By 2025 a quarter of all drivers in the U.S. will be over age 65. And while seniors are involved in more accidents per capita than younger adults, they are far safer than teens. But over age 70, traffic fatalities increase with age; by age 85, drivers have probably outlived their ability to drive safely.

Every year some 600,000 adults stop driving. But because seniors make 90% of their trips in private cars, either driving or as passengers, what happens next?

When seniors stop driving it impacts more than their mobility — it can also affect their health.

Seniors who stop driving make 15% fewer trips to the doctor. They can't get out to shop as much. They isolate socially, which can lead to depression and a downward spiral in health.

Even before their kids take away their car keys, seniors self-regulate their time behind the wheel. Maybe they avoid highway driving or traveling at rush hour. And who likes driving at night?

Living in the suburbs, 80% of seniors have their homes in car-dependent neighborhoods. Some 53% of those areas don't have sidewalks and 60% are not within a ten minute walk of a transit stop, assuming they can still walk that distance.

That's why AARP is making senior mobility a national issue. And the firm's Associate State Director for Connecticut, Anna Doroghazi, is becoming a frequent speaker and lobbyist in Hartford.

"We are all going to have to be more involved in transportation issues," she told me. And her group's support for pedestrian safety legislation is just the start.

"We want everyone to think about building 'livable communities' where people don't need a car but can walk or catch a free ride to their nearby services. And if that's good for (your mobility) at age 80, it'll also be good for you at age 8."

Remember — it's not just seniors who can be car-less. Think of those with special needs who can't drive or low income residents who can't afford to, not to mention millennials who are said to have no interest in car ownership. How do they get around?

The "carless in Connecticut" are probably familiar with catching Metro-North to go into New York City. But do they have access to or know anything about local bus service? Or Paratransit? Or Micro Transit, on-demand services?

Local social service agencies are doing a better job of giving their clients mobility options. And the amazing folks at The Kennedy Center have a great "Travel Training" program to help the disabled, both physically and emotionally, build confidence about riding the bus.

It's not the cost of bus fare that dissuades seniors from riding. It's not knowing where the bus stops are, when they run, the lack of a shelter and, yes, probably a fear for their safety. Plus, not all buses kneel making front door access a challenge.

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But kudos to the AARP for embracing this issue. Their advocacy for seniors should bring benefits to us all.