

Driving Force: Resources for Aging Behind and Beyond the Wheel

By Susan Marshall



Maybe you've successfully renewed a driver's license only to be told during a cognitive screening—or even before being screened—that the card in your wallet doesn't mean you should be driving. Maybe you've been given a referral for an occupational therapy driving assessment at one of the local hospitals. The rest is up to you.

Are you now obligated in some way to pursue this referral despite your license and excellent driving record? Do you stop driving in the meantime? Do you seek other opinions and wait until more cognitive and clinical test results are in? Will you or your doctor be required to report any degree of cognitive impairment or dementia under “medical conditions” at your DMV? A wide range of questions about driving ability can escalate with aging and fill us with anxiety, whether we are facing them ourselves or trying to help someone we love. Some doctors might touch on the subject briskly,

broadly, or rather vaguely and with little attention to soft skills. Fortunately, there are many other resources that help compensate.

In terms of Internet research, there are some topic areas that I've found particularly helpful to read about and would encourage you to investigate further as well. Driving programs, for example, can vary not only in terms of who sponsors them, but also in regard to evaluation approaches, the tailored input they offer for specific cases, costs and insurance eligibility, and policies for confidentiality or for exchange of information with the DMV and others. In searching the big picture, I've used key words such as the following: seniors, driving, programs, evaluation, assessment, improvement, rehabilitation, refresher, safety, occupational therapy. Resources found this way, such as AOTA's [“Behind the Wheel: Occupational Therapy and Older Drivers”](#) and the American Geriatrics Society's (and in collaboration with National Highway Traffic Safety Administration [“Clinician's Guide to Assessing and Counseling Older Drivers”](#)) deepen awareness before you investigate certain programs more directly.

I've also found resources with names such as [“U.S. Laws on Driving with MCI and Alzheimer's Disease”](#) that illuminate the ways in which DMV expectations can vary across states. There are resources that summarize the types of cognitive and physical changes to monitor for such as Mayo Clinic's [“Alzheimer's and Dementia: When to Stop Driving”](#) and AARP's [“Steps to Keep Older Drivers Safe and Driving Longer,”](#) as well as a variety of explanations as to why certain levels of cognitive impairment or dementia don't necessarily equate to a need to stop driving. And I've searched “life beyond driving” to better understand suggestions for accessible, affordable, and creative options for getting where one wants to go, and what kinds of gaps and opportunities exist in public and private transportation.

There is also the insight, perspective, empathy, and inspiration to be gained from meeting and talking with others about their experiences. Fellow Senior Access Points volunteer Linda Osmundson, for example, told me the story of her husband Bob who lost his driver's license within a few years of being diagnosed with a neurodegenerative condition called PSP (Progressive Supranuclear Palsy). Even before Bob lost his license, Linda had tried to take on more of the driving. In Bob's case, when he could no longer meet the requirements for his license renewal, his neurologist declined to approve him for even a learner's permit due to the progression of the PSP. Bob became very accepting of this, but each person's journey is unique. Through all this, Linda benefitted from a local support group with [Elderhaus](#). This is another reminder that while general advice can sometimes be tricky, there are local supports available. The Senior Access Points website can help you learn more about options in Larimer County.

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