



PUTTING RESEARCH TO WORK

BRIEF

Improving Mobility for Wisconsin's Elderly

By 2035, the number of elderly residents in Wisconsin is expected to nearly double, and one in four drivers on Wisconsin roads will be elderly. According to national statistics, the elderly are more likely to be involved in crashes on a per-mile basis, more likely to be at fault in multi-car accidents and more likely to be injured in an accident than younger demographics. Many elderly residents who do not drive themselves rely heavily on public transportation to maintain a connection to their communities.

What's the Problem?

The rapid increase in older drivers resulting from the aging baby boomer generation calls for deliberate strategies to effectively support elderly resident mobility and safety. WisDOT's website currently provides numerous resources geared toward older drivers, including a wide variety of public transportation options. To prepare for these dramatic population projections, WisDOT sought to examine its policies and find ways to improve service to this growing demographic.

Research Objectives

The goal of this project was to address the transit and infrastructure issues that will arise from Wisconsin's projected elderly population growth. The study's objectives were to:

- Review and evaluate existing practices in Wisconsin, and interview managers of state and local programs for the elderly to identify areas of improvement.
- Examine the population growth projections for elderly residents at both the state and county level.
- Conduct an extensive survey and numerous focus groups with seniors throughout the state to collect data about the transportation concerns, preferences and needs of Wisconsin's elderly residents.
- Examine innovative practices elsewhere for assisting elderly drivers.
- Use the collected data as a basis for specific analysis and recommendations for all business areas at WisDOT.

Methodology

Researchers created a large-scale survey for elderly residents to communicate their transportation habits, needs, preferences and opinions, and received 4,099 responses from elderly residents across the state. Those responses were analyzed on a county-by-county basis and according to other demographic categories such as income, mobility and age. In addition, researchers conducted focus groups with elderly drivers at 16 locations throughout the state and two meetings with representatives of tribal nations.

Researchers used data collected by local governments and neighboring states to chart the population and demographic growth patterns of elderly residents in Wisconsin. Using the experiences of other states, federal agencies and private organizations, researchers also identified best practices for WisDOT's consideration.

Best Practices

After reviewing other state practices of evaluating elderly drivers' performance, researchers found that identifying and assessing at-risk drivers based on performance was a more productive alternative than automatic license retention assessments based on age. The researchers encouraged building partnerships with medical and law enforcement communities to identify and assess at-risk drivers.

Investigator



"We found some real challenges to providing mobility options in our state. Ultimately, this research made the case for an investment in the future."

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“Mobility is clearly an issue that resonates with Wisconsin’s elderly population. We had a very good response to the surveys and focus groups conducted by the research team that contributed to the quality of the research.”

—Daniel Yeh
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Although the majority of elderly respondents to the survey use a private automobile for transportation, approximately 40 percent reported using public or specialized transit services within the last two years.

Researchers also reviewed education and training materials for older drivers and their family members about the impact of aging on mobility, such as a multimedia toolkit developed in Michigan. Incentivizing participation in such education initiatives was noted, such as Pennsylvania DOT’s proposal to encourage insurance companies to offer discounts to participants.

Advancements in vehicle technology (such as smaller steering wheels) and roadway design that could improve safety for elderly drivers were assessed. Researchers also reviewed public transit system improvements to address the needs of elderly residents, including supporting door-to-door demand-response systems and augmenting traditional fixed-point transit systems to make them more convenient for the elderly.

Results

Researchers made 13 recommendations, addressing each of the business areas in WisDOT, including:

- Develop high-quality information services and self-assessment tools for elderly drivers, making them available on the WisDOT website and in regional senior centers.
- Consider creating a medical advisory board in conjunction with the state’s medical community to guide the state’s policies about medical fitness for driving.
- Analyze crash trends involving elderly drivers and install appropriate countermeasures and license policies. Enhance education materials and outreach programs involving roundabouts and other new design practices with an older audience in mind.
- Identify and respond to gaps in transit service for elderly riders, specifically at night and on weekends. To assist local agencies in managing successful transit programs, use Rural Transit Assistance Program funds to help build technical expertise regarding budgeting, data collection and program applications.
- Work with insurance companies to offer discounts for elderly drivers who complete a state-approved drivers’ education course.

Implementation

The full report and recommendations are being communicated to the appropriate WisDOT divisions and bureaus for review and potential policy changes to benefit elderly drivers and riders in Wisconsin.

This brief summarizes Project 0092-10-19, “Addressing Elderly Mobility Issues in Wisconsin,” produced through the Wisconsin Department of Transportation Research Program, P.O. Box 7915, Madison, WI 53707.

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