


# When it's time to stop driving, how can seniors get around car-centric New Jersey?

6-minute read

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When Jo-Anne Williams rode in the car with her elderly in-laws in Bergen County for the last time, her father-in-law sat behind the steering wheel even though he had advancing macular degeneration, an age-related eye disease that causes the loss of central vision.

His wife, in the passenger seat, described for him each approaching signal light and stop sign.

"She was the eyes," Williams said. "It was terrifying to see, but that was how they were going to the grocery store."

Williams' family is far from alone.

As part of its ongoing series "[Aging in New Jersey](#)," NorthJersey.com and the USA Today Network New Jersey today examine how New Jersey seniors struggle to give up their car keys even when it's clear they no longer can drive safely — in a state that doesn't make it easy to find alternatives.

Resistance often centers on a senior's loss of independence and control over their own lives. A state dense with jug handles, cloverleaves and heavy merges doesn't make it easier.





Many New Jersey seniors who give up driving rely on paratransit vans run by the government or non-profits to take them to medical appointments. *NorthJersey.com File Photo*

The issue also underscores that many of New Jersey’s suburbs are not built for seniors. The lack of easily accessible transit — and even sidewalks, in some communities — turn single-family homes into islands and cars into rafts.

“The result is forced isolation,” said Ashley Ermer, a Montclair State University professor who focuses on senior issues. “When someone’s ability to get around is restricted, you’re essentially turning off other parts of their life, and no one wants that.”

### **Driving skills worsen with age**

Screening the elderly for driving safety is an issue that straddles the line between senior discrimination and a realistic acknowledgment that driving skills diminish with advancing age. Many people in their 70s and 80s still drive with little problem. But for most, aging causes a decline in key driving functions, from eyesight to reaction time.

Some drivers try to adapt. They drive more slowly and become more cautious at pedestrian crossings and intersections. They stop driving at night, during busy times of the day, or on highways.

But driving when one's capabilities are diminished is a problem that often finds its way into police blotters across New Jersey, as run-of-the-mill fender benders and even more serious accidents, such as one that occurred in February, when an 82-year-old driver [crashed into a Fair Lawn restaurant, injuring two diners.](#)

AAA — the biggest advocacy group for safe driving — recommends that senior drivers begin planning for “driver retirement” around the time they retire from work. Seniors outlive their ability to drive by seven to 10 years, according to an [AAA report.](#)

Safety advocates say age should never be the sole factor in determining whether to license a driver. Ability needs to be factored in as well.

**Aging in NJ series:** [What happens when an elderly relative can't live alone? Here's all you need to know](#)

**Helping them give up the keys:** [How to ease NJ seniors into life without driving](#)



Two people were injured when an 82-year-old driver's sport utility vehicle slammed into the Green Dragon restaurant in Fair Lawn on Feb. 5. Police Officer Luis Vasquez / [@itsluisvasquez](#)

But unlike other states, New Jersey doesn't test ability — until there's a problem.

New Jersey doesn't require any road tests or vision tests for seniors when renewing licenses. Vision tests are mandated only for [first-time permit applicants](#), the majority of whom are teenagers.

[More than 30 other states](#) require shorter license renewal times or vision exams. The strictest state, Illinois, requires drivers over 75 to take a road test every time they renew their license.



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New Jersey's Motor Vehicle Commission cannot simply add requirements. The Legislature would have to pass a new law, said Bill Connolly, an agency spokesman. And Trenton lawmakers have avoided advancing legislation about such a politically charged subject for seniors, who tend to vote with greater frequency than younger New Jerseyans.

Taking away someone's driving privileges is a lengthy process that requires a doctor's examination and ultimately a determination by a [special MVC panel](#) made up of physicians.

In 2019, the last full year before the COVID-19 pandemic, there were more than 2,500 medical review cases brought to the Motor Vehicle Commission. The agency required 1,448 drivers to periodically send documentation that they are medically fit to drive. ~~suspended the licenses~~

documentation that they are medically fit to drive, suspended the licenses of 845 drivers and declined to take action on 491 other drivers, according to state data.

### **'Our laws fail us'**

Of all the obstacles Ellen Feld had to overcome while caring for her mom with dementia, getting her off the road may have been the most difficult.

“Our laws fail us,” Feld said. “Getting someone off the road who is resistant shouldn't be as hard as it is.”

Feld's mom had lived alone in Ridgewood and had long insisted she was capable of driving — even as her memory and cognitive abilities began to decline. Feld tried to talk her out of driving. Then Feld barred her kids from getting in the car with their grandmother behind the wheel.

“My mom would not recognize that she had any deficits, so it became a constant fight,” she said.



"Our laws fail us," Ellen Feld said. "Getting someone off the road who is resistant shouldn't be as hard as it is." *Naris Isarapukdee, Getty Images/Stockphoto*

About 10 years ago Feld received a call from a good Samaritan in Hoboken who said her mom was there in her car, confused. She had driven the roughly 24 miles from Ridgewood to Hoboken — and didn't know how she got there.

“Fortunately she landed in a nice place with a nice person who helped park her car in a garage,” Feld said.

Her mom came home by cab. Feld fetched the car the next day, parked it in her mom's driveway and kept the keys. Her mom eventually called the police on Feld, who explained the situation to the officers.

Feld eventually got an occupational therapist to conduct a road test with her mom. "My mom was so bad that the therapist stopped it soon after it started," Feld said.

Joan Doyle's parents lived in a Morris County community where a car was essential to daily life. Driving home one day, her father hit the gas pedal instead of the brakes on a hill approaching his home. The car went airborne across his neighbors' steps and landed in their window.

"I had to deal with the insurance, the car repair shop," Doyle said. "And on top of everything, my dad is telling me it wasn't him, it was something wrong with the car. So I have to ask the car repair shop to check that out and see if there was some sort of malfunction. There wasn't."

### **Finding senior driving services and other alternatives to the car**

All New Jersey counties, many municipalities and some nonprofit groups operate paratransit shuttle services for seniors and the disabled. Services vary, but they often allow seniors to schedule door-to-door service to medical facilities, community centers, shopping and other destinations. They've become a vital part of life, especially for seniors who live alone.

The demand for those services is only going to increase as New Jersey's population of those age 60 and older is expected to grow to 3 million by the end of this decade due to the baby boom bubble.



Academics and elder care advocates have been trying to enlist local officials to create "[age-friendly communities](#)" — towns like Fair Lawn, Westwood, Wayne and Livingston — that focus more on care and services for seniors, including an emphasis on transportation.

Retirement communities — from the sprawling villages that have dotted Ocean County for half a century to smaller ones that sprang up in Passaic and Morris County in the last 20 years — have long offered shuttle service to stores, churches and more.

While the rise of transit villages from Edison to Wood-Ridge, with dense housing and access to trains, is geared toward commuters, the model may also work for seniors.

### **Learning to use public transit**

But transforming the classic postwar sprawling suburb is not an easy task. Along with the emphasis on cars, much of North and Central Jersey's mass transit system is designed to get commuters into and out of New York City, not from one place in New Jersey to another.

As a result, many older New Jerseyans who were never commuters have little to no experience riding on an NJ Transit bus or train.





A group of seniors at the Secaucus Junction station learning to use mass transit under a Rutgers University program. *Courtesy Of NJTIP At Rutgers*

“I joke that in New York you have to learn how to use a car and in New Jersey you actually have to learn how to use public transportation,” said Karen Alexander, managing director of the New Jersey Travel Independence Program at Rutgers University.

Alexander and her colleagues teach seniors how to use NJ Transit. They have plotted destinations along the 73 bus line in Morris and Essex counties. They educate them that fares are half-off for those 62 years and older, and that buses are equipped with lifts to help get them on and off. They have taken groups on train rides and shown them how to transfer at Secaucus Junction or get into Manhattan via Hoboken Terminal.

"It's an antidote to isolation," Alexander said. "It gives people the tools to make a different map in their head of where they might want to go and how to get there. They begin to see the world through transit — and many realize they can do a lot without a car."

*Coming next week: Families are spread out across the country now more than ever. How to take care of your aging loved one from hundreds or thousands of miles away.*

*Editor's note: Is your family going through the process of getting care for an older loved one? Do you have tips for other families? If you'd like to share your story, contact reporter Scott Fallon at [fallon@northjersey.com](mailto:fallon@northjersey.com).*



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