

AARP Driver Safety Program training better drivers

By Karen Rifkin Ukiah Daily Journal

Updated:

UkiahDailyJournal.com

for Ukiah Daily Journal

Norm McLean is a volunteer teacher for AARP's Driver Safety Program. It is open to all drivers; if you are 55 or older and complete the training, your auto insurance carrier will provide a discount. He and his wife save \$60 a year on both their cars. He says, "The course reminded me about safety issues; it is beneficial for all of us in terms of being better drivers."

The program is an eight-hour course taught over two days and includes everything from proper placement of your hands on the steering wheel to realizing when it is time to retire from driving. McLean says, "One of the most significant things I learned in the class was how to adjust my rear view mirrors, just about eliminating my blind spots. For your left mirror, you lean against the window and adjust the mirror so you can just see the left side of your car; for the right mirror, lean over towards the middle of the car and adjust so you can just see the right side of your car."

"On a two-lane roadway with both lanes going the same direction, you initially sight cars approaching from behind in your overhead mirror. With a car is intent on passing and if you have your outside mirrors adjusted correctly, you will know that the passing vehicle is right beside you when you can no longer see it in your left hand mirror."

The course is broken into eight units beginning with, of course, an introduction to the objectives of the class. The second unit, knowing ourselves, includes abilities we might be losing, our reaction time, flexibility, regular medications and use of alcohol.

Next unit, safe driving strategies, runs the gamut from reminders about not driving when you are angry to correct adjustment of your seat and mirrors. Seeing and scanning: make sure you are three seconds behind the car in front of you in town and scanning 10 to 15 seconds in front of you on the highway; create a space cushion around your car, front, back and to the sides. Have as much space around you as possible.

Intersections are the most dangerous place for senior drivers; you have traffic coming from all directions. Be aware of adverse weather conditions; the roads are the slickest after the first winter rains because of the quantity of oil deposited on them during the dry season. Avoid a head-on crash; it is safer to hit a telephone pole. Parking lots can be difficult to maneuver as we age; it is harder to turn our bodies to see everything in back and to the sides.

Unit four includes our driving partners, other people on the road. Be aware that trucks and commercial vehicles have blind spots. Although McLean has never personally heard of such a thing, he says not to follow too closely behind a large vehicle; there is a possibility of being sucked under.

Be aware of bicyclists; give them plenty of room. Don't tap your horn; be careful making a right turn; be careful opening the driver's side door. Remember, many of them are children.

Never get out of your car to argue. If someone is aggressively following you, go to a safe, lighted place: a

shopping center, a police or fire station, a gas station. Do not go home.

Be aware of impaired or drowsy drivers or those who are distracted, eating, drinking, talking with their passengers, talking on their cell phone.

Next, unit five -- knowing our roads and highways. Know your traffic signs and what they mean; be aware of color, size, shape and the message. When you enter the freeway, enter as close as possible to the speed limit and as close as possible to the speed of the cars; make sure you have room to get in. Always yield the right of way; while on the freeway, if safe, move to the left lane to allow incoming traffic to merge.

Unit six includes understanding our vehicles. Make sure your head rest is set properly, right behind your head. If you get rear ended or are in an accident, you will be able to bounce back. You want a clear line of sight over your steering wheel. Make sure there is plenty of room between the center of your chest and the driver's side airbag. If the bag opens in time, which it is designed to do, it not only cushions you but also explodes. The proper placement for your hands on the steering wheel is at eight (o'clock) and four (o'clock). If you are still driving at 10 and 2 there is the possibility of the airbag breaking your arms when it pops out.

The rule for anti-lock brakes is stomp on your brakes, stay there; don't ease up and steer the car. Most cars are now equipped with them. With regular brakes you cannot steer the car when you are braking. Maintain proper tire pressure, fluid levels and lights.

When thinking about a new vehicle, consider color: lighter, brighter colors make cars more visible especially at night or in the rain. Keeping lights on during the day as well as the night adds visibility and safety. Fully adjustable seats, rear window defroster and wipers, side curtained air bags and anti lock brakes are other important safety features.

Prior to unit eight, the wrap up, is unit seven, the most important one -- judging our driving fitness and knowing when it is time to retire from behind the wheel. McLean says it was initially the most difficult topic for him to address but knowing that we all get there, he began the discourse with that statement and it became easier. "We are all getting older and will reach that point at some time. Sight, hearing and depth perception must be assessed - driving too fast, too slowly for road conditions; parking inappropriately; delayed responses to unexpected situations; failing to recognize dangerous situations; scratches or dents on your car; getting lost more often; more frequent close calls. It's important to consider your options when you can no longer drive independently: taxi, bus, family, friends."

The thing that really impressed McLean was watching one of the videos that come with the course. Dummies in a car, not belted in, no air bags, are driving into a wall at 35 mph. The dummy driver's head breaks the windshield. The following sequence shows them belted in with air bags; they fare much better.

The fee for the course is \$12 for AARP members and \$14 for non members. The next class will be held on Aug. 26 and 27 at 747 S. State St. Call Norm McLean at 707-462-1257 for further information.