



## Online Newsletter *Volume 1, Number 1: August 2002*

### Related Links:

A report on the conference in the [Maricopa Association of Governments \(MAG\) May 2002 newsletter](#)

Conference [Home Page](#)

[MAG Regional Action Plan on Aging and Mobility](#)

[MAG Recommendations from the Older Mobility Work Group](#)

National Highway Traffic Safety Administration's [National Agenda \(PDF\)](#)

[AARP survey, "Understanding Senior Transportation" \(PDF\)](#)

### Other stories this issue:

[Older Adults Are Driving Transportation Policy](#)

[Why Older Adults Don't Walk](#)

[Scrambling for Safety](#)

[Aging Behind the Wheel](#)

[Making Oakland Safer for Older Pedestrians](#)

## Getting to the Heart of Aging and Mobility

### National Conference on Aging and Mobility finds that transportation means more than just getting around

A recurring theme at the National Conference on Aging and Mobility, "Senior Mobility in the 21st Century: What Can We Do to Prepare?," was that access to safe, reliable transportation for the nation's growing older population is more than a question of transportation: it touches on fundamental aspects of seniors' health and sense of well-being in their later years. Conference participants also stressed the pressing need to make changes now in order to be ready for the coming wave of older adults.

The conference, which was organized by the Maricopa Association of Governments, took place in Phoenix, AZ, March 25-27. It attracted upwards of 200 participants, who included representatives from non-profit organizations, transportation and transit agencies, and city and regional planning organizations, as well as epidemiologists, injury prevention experts, transportation engineers, and planners. They explored the transportation barriers that older adults experience now and proposed ways to eliminate or reduce them in the future by using a mix of land use policies, vehicle and roadway design, public health strategies, training and education, and transportation policy and planning.

The keynote speaker was Dr. Joseph Coughlin, Director of the Massachusetts Institute of Technology's AgeLab in the Center for Transportation Studies. He described transportation as being just as vital to an older person's sense of well-being and ability to live independently as the standard benchmarks of good health and financial security. Because of its important role in the older person's quality of life, researchers should view transportation as an expression of freedom, independence, and identity, not just as a way of getting from one place to another, he said. Coughlin also stressed the urgency of devising and implementing solutions, because changes in transportation systems can take years to come about. He called for immediate action in order for improvements to be in place in time for the majority of the nation's growing older population.

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The potential solutions that were presented ranged from broad changes such as land use policies to encourage more pedestrian-friendly communities or programs to intervene with older drivers before they are forced to suddenly give up their cars, to informal, small-scale strategies such as facilitating ridesharing among family and friends and far-reaching technological developments like "smart" cars that can assume some driving tasks of less-able drivers.

With anywhere from 20-25% of the population expected to be 60 or older when the aging of the population peaks, transportation facilities will be serving a significantly older demographic. A partial picture of how today's system is perceived by older people was obtained in "Understanding Senior Transportation," a survey of some 2,400 adults aged 50 and older conducted by the Public Policy Institute of the AARP (formerly the American Association of Retired Persons). Respondents cited numerous barriers to using the current transportation system, across a range of modes, including driving, walking, ridesharing, and using public transit, according to Audrey Straight, Senior Policy Advisor at the Institute. A large number of respondents reported that walking presented difficulties because it was physically hard and because few destinations were easily reached on foot. But many said that driving—the way that seniors make most of their trips—was a challenge, too, because inconsiderate drivers and traffic congestion made it stressful. Respondents disliked ridesharing because it made them feel as if they were losing their independence and imposing on others. They said that public transportation didn't go to enough destinations and often was difficult to get to.

Older drivers need to be made more aware of the value and availability of rehabilitation programs that can enable them to continue driving despite disabilities, noted Linda Hunt, Director of the Maryville University Occupational Therapy Program. She presented the results of a project funded by General Motors that identified 75 older adults aged 66 to 90 who had stopped driving because of physical or cognitive impairments and engaged them in an assessment and training program. One finding was that 30% of the stroke victims in the study who had physical disabilities (as opposed to cognitive impairments) could be retrained to drive well enough to operate safely. All of them had given up driving because they didn't know rehabilitation programs were available or would work for them.

Donald Trilling of the Office of Policy Development in the U.S. Department of Transportation described the department's development of the National Highway Safety Administration's National Agenda (also mentioned in the story "[How Older Adults Will Drive Transportation Policy](#)"), which outlines seven areas where action is needed to prepare users, vehicles, and highways and other types of transportation infrastructure for the coming wave of older travelers. The areas are: safer, easier-to-use infrastructure; safer, easier-to-use automobiles; improved training for older drivers; transportation services that are better suited to the older users; state and local participation in devising new program and policies; wider dissemination of information about transportation policies and options for

the older transportation user; and additional basic research.

The Maricopa Association of Governments has issued a call to metropolitan planning organizations around the country to make transportation for older users a top priority and has developed its own Regional Action Plan on Aging and Mobility, which outlines 25 recommendations for improving older people's access to transportation.

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