

# Hey!

## Older pedestrians need more time than *that* to cross a street!

Making it safely across the street before the “Walk” signal changes to “Don’t walk” can be a challenge at some U.S. intersections.

This is especially the case for senior pedestrians said Dan Burden, who is a member of the *Partnership for a Walkable America* — a coalition of private, state and federal organizations united with the common cause of raising public awareness about the need to make roads safer and more accessible for pedestrians.

“The elderly pedestrian is suffering a double wammy when ‘Walk’ signals are too short,” said Burden, director of Walkable Communities, Inc., in High Springs, Fla. “Not only do they move more slowly and find it a greater challenge to get across the street, but they also lack the agility to jump out of the way if a car comes too near them.”

Short pedestrian walk signals are a problem for older walkers in many U.S. cities.

Recently, for instance, senior citizens living in several Staten Island, N.Y. apartment complexes located on a busy six-lane boulevard, complained to local traffic authorities that traffic lights on their street didn’t give them sufficient time to cross the road.

“The situation is pretty scary,” the *New York Daily News* quoted Rosemary Tyndell as saying.



Quick signal changes can be daunting for seniors faced with long walks and a slow stride.

Tyndell, who is in her seventies and walks with a cane, lives on the street and crosses it regularly to use the shops located on the other side.

“There is not enough time to make it across, especially when you have a motorist trying to beat the light,” she said.

Dr. Norman Johnson of Chapel Hill, N.C. is familiar with the short “Walk” signal problem.

The one near his office, for instance, barely gives the 79-year-old retired statistics professor from the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill enough time to cross the street.

“I always feel very relieved once I get across there,” he said

Providing traffic lights that give older pedestrians like Tyndell and Johnson adequate time to safely cross streets is a concern for the members of the *Partnership for a Walkable America*

“Traffic engineers in their guidelines for timing traffic signals, often use walking speed rates that have generally been recognized as being beyond the capacity of many seniors to achieve,” said Partnership member Bill Wilkinson, director of the Pedestrian Federation of America in Washington D.C.

“What happens is many seniors get a third of the way across the street when the signal begins to flash and then they’re confused about whether they should continue on or go back,” he said.

## **Longer Traffic Walk Lights Needed**

In the traffic engineering field, the accepted average crossing speed given for a person to cross a street is 4 feet per second, according to Partnership member Carol Tan Esse, program manager for pedestrian and bicycle safety research for the Federal Highway Administration (FHWA).

“Intuitively, you would think that an older pedestrian walks slower and in areas where you have many senior pedestrians, you would want to time the signals accordingly,” Esse said. “But up until recently, traffic engineering manuals did not provide specific guidelines as to how long walk lights should be for older pedestrians.”

Changes are being made to address this area of traffic engineering, said Richard Knoblauch, director of the Center for Applied Research in Great Falls, Va., who recently conducted a study of crossing speeds among older pedestrians for the FHWA.

Knoblauch said the results of the study showed that older people are about 75 percent slower in

crossing streets than younger people. and 25 percent slower in initially responding to the “walk” signal and beginning to cross the street.

“The numbers that we came up with are available for city traffic engineers to adjust their traffic signal timing,” Knoblauch said. “Places with high concentrations of older residents are not insensitive to this issue and are starting to make their traffic lights longer.”

Thomas Brahms, executive director of the Institute of Transportation Engineers in Washington D.C. went further to say that all people, regardless of their age, walk at different speeds.

“The dynamics of the pedestrian and how the pedestrian is treated is something that needs continued research,” he said.

## **The Zone Factor**

Zoning cities so that areas with high numbers of senior citizens are designed appropriate to their needs may also be an important key for traffic engineers, said Richard Blomberg, president of Dunlap & Associates. His Stamford, Conn. research organization specializes in pedestrian safety research and is currently working on a study in Phoenix and Chicago investigating areas where many crashes involving senior pedestrians have taken place. Part of the study, which is funded by the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration and FHWA, involves developing countermeasures to lower the crash risk of older walkers in those areas.

“In some cases, recommendations have been made to increase the length of walk signals,” Blomberg said. Other traffic engineering changes have included adjusting crosswalk placements, said Mike Cynecki, who chairs the Transportation Research Board’s

Pedestrian Committee. Cynecki is collaborating with Blomberg on the project.

“In some cases, we put in crosswalks and in some cases we took them out,” he said. Sometimes crosswalks give people a false sense of security and they may act less safe. That’s when crashes start to happen.”

“Sometimes people think that if they can see those crosswalk lines really well, then everybody else can see them really well,” he said.

## **Educating Older Walkers**

A major portion of the project is geared toward educating seniors about how to be safer pedestrians.

Many pedestrians, for example, fail to understand that the flashing orange “Don’t Walk” signal is a warning for pedestrians who may want to begin crossing the street at that time that there is not enough time to safely do so, Blomberg said.

He added that there is still time for pedestrians who are in the street to safely continue to the other side. Elderly pedestrians who need extra crossing time should wait for a “fresh” walk signal to give them maximum time to cross.

As part of the project, information packets with safety tips are being hung on senior citizens’ door handles in the targeted zones. Pedestrian safety presentations are also being made at senior health fairs and senior citizen centers. Additionally, radio stations are helping by broadcasting safety tips.

Seniors in these zones are later surveyed about their knowledge of pedestrian safety and about where they received that information.

“By targeting zones, we’ve been able to do things that wouldn’t be cost-effective to do throughout a whole city,” Blomberg said.

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