

Seniors learn how to stay on the road safely with CarFit and Southlake



A new initiative dedicated to helping drivers 65 and over stay on the road safely, and even after experiencing a physical challenge, is now making inroads into the Greater Toronto Area.

CarFit, an initiative led in Canada by the Canadian Association of Occupational Therapists and CAA, held their first events in the Greater Toronto Area last week with Southlake Regional Health Centre's Trauma Unit in Newmarket.

As Southlake is a Level 3 trauma centre for the area, the CarFit team spent last Thursday morning training members of the hospital's trauma team on their 12-point safety checklist, enabling the the hospital to help keep seniors safe behind the wheel.

“This is for our over-65 population to fit them to their vehicles,” says Lynda Foster, Trauma Coordinator for Southlake. “As you go through ages and stages, things change, people get new hips, knees and shoulder injuries. We really work with our Occupational Therapy team to make sure our community is really fitted to the safest possible way of driving.

“With our trauma program here at Southlake, we have an injury prevention portfolio and we're really trying to bolster and offer as many things as we can. This gave us an opportunity to really make sure we're providing the safest avenue possible for our seniors to be driving.”

According to Brenda Grant, CarFit coordinator for the Canadian Association of Occupational Therapists, the program was developed by AAA, the American Association of Occupational Therapists and the American Association of Retired Persons (AARP), recognizing that older adults experience changes to their body, including osteoporosis, which can make them more susceptible to injury.

“It's a fun, educational program ? it's more from a preventative point of view to keep people safely driving. Eventually, CAA and the Canadian Association of Occupational Therapists brought it to Canada, we have been working on it close to a decade now, and we have another team promoting and creating the program here in Southern Ontario.”

Thursday's launch invited senior drivers to come through a checkpoint set up near the hospital, where the recently trained Occupational Therapists at Southlake were available to take each driver through a 12-point checklist. Some of the areas the checklist covered were ensuring a clear line of sight over the steering wheel, maintaining adequate space between the driver and the airbag, proper pedal positioning, and adjusting mirrors to minimize blind spots.

First to go through the checkpoint was retired paramedic Ian Phythian, 78, who served as a York Region paramedic for 51 years. Having responded to more than his fair share of car accidents, he had nothing but praise for this safety program.

?So far, I'm not doing too bad,? he said with a chuckle, giving a thumbs-up to Occupational Therapists Samantha and Christeena. ?I am sure some people will have to be adjusted and this is good training for senior citizens.?

Now that they've made this first foray into the GTA, both CarFit and Southlake are hoping to see the initiative grow across the area.

Grant says she would love to connect with seniors centres, hospitals and other like organizations to expand the program and, for seniors who might be looking for a brush up or a reassuring confidence boost as they get behind the wheel after a traumatic injury or surgery, Foster says she and her team can make that happen simply by emailing injuryprevention@southlake.ca.

If you are interested in having CarFit a part of your organization, email Grant at carfit@cot.ca.

By Brock Weir