



Grant Helps Mercy Get Seniors Back Behind the Wheel

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Pansy Bingham is back to driving in Springfield, Mo. Pansy Bingham is a senior on the go. At 80 years old, the Springfield native rarely misses weekly trips to the senior center; but last winter, her routine hit a speed bump.

“I was being treated at Mercy for a serious infection when suddenly, overnight, I suffered a stroke,” she recalled. “My daughters said I was missing words when I talked, but just by looking at me you couldn’t tell any different.” Her doctors suggested she put the

brakes on her driving until Mercy’s Outpatient Therapy department could better understand her impairments. “They told me I needed to assess my driving, because my brain had really been affected.”

Bingham is among dozens of seniors who turn to Mercy’s Outpatient Therapy driving rehabilitation program each year; it’s an assessment that includes in-clinic testing, on-the-road evaluation/training and other advanced methods for people with age-related memory and thinking issues, or mild cognitive impairment. Since 2009, the Greene County Senior Citizens’ Service Fund has awarded the program a \$30,000 grant each year, to get drivers back behind the wheel – if they’re deemed fit.

“Losing the ability to drive is one of the first big things to happen to people that restricts their independence,” said Krissy Sinor, chair of the Senior Citizens’ Services Fund Tax Board. “We’ve recognized the importance of that, and we want to remind taxpayers that they’re really helping people.”

“Just because someone has suffered a stroke, it doesn’t mean he or she can’t drive,” said Matt Skala, therapy manager of the Outpatient Therapy department. “The same goes for old age. We all naturally slow down and react slower later in life. So instead of putting down their keys, we step back to get a global perspective.”

The first step is a three-hour evaluation of the patient's current license status, medical history, current medications, driving goals, vision, depth perception, contrast sensitivity, motor and cognitive skills. That will decide whether the driver gets a green light for behind-the-wheel assessment, like Bingham.

"They came to me every day and I drove them to places around town like the grocery store and church," said Bingham, who drove a special Chevrolet Impala that Mercy acquired in 2008. It's outfitted with adaptive hand controls, a passenger-controlled brake system, special mirrors and more. "It took some getting used to," she added, "but it really helped me focus and learn to be a lot more careful."

Bingham passed the test, but is only able to drive in town during the day. She has been told to avoid highway driving, but her goal is to eventually get reassessed. "I can go to the places I need to go," Bingham said. "I've learned to follow my therapists' instructions and I can't argue with them."

Since March 2014, Skala says 50 percent of patients have returned to driving. To learn more about Mercy's Driving Rehabilitation Program, call (417) 820-2149.

The fee for assessment is \$300 and training is \$100 per hour, which many seniors are unable to afford and often stop driving as a result. Mercy pursued the grant from the Greene County Senior Citizens' Service Fund to cover those costs. It was established in 2005 following a voter-approved 5-cent levy tax in order to provide services to persons aged 60 and older in the county.

For more information about this program visit:

<https://www.mercy.net/springfieldmo/senior-services-in-springfield/education-training>