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Paul Damron gets his vehicle checked by Rick Dickerson and East Carolina University master of science and occupational therapy students Michelle McBride and Courtney Smith on Saturday at the Eastern Pines Church of Christ.

Scott Davis/The Daily Reflector



Brittini Mattocks gives Art Benitez instructions on how to get his vehicle checked Saturday at the Eastern Pines Church of Christ.

Scott Davis/The Daily Reflector



ECU program helps seniors drive safely

By Michael Abramowitz
The Daily Reflector

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The increasing number of older drivers on U.S. and North Carolina highways underscores the importance of safe driving among mature drivers, said volunteers at Saturday's Car Fit event at Eastern Pines Church of Christ in Greenville.

Faculty and students from East Carolina University's occupational therapy department, led by professor Anne Dickerson, led more than a dozen drivers and their vehicles through the nearly 20-minute Car Fit process at staged checkpoints in the church parking lot. They worked with drivers to assure that they and their cars made as good a fit together as possible for safety and comfort.

"By 2030, one in five drivers will be age 65 or older, with more than 30 million older adults on U.S. roads," Dickerson said. "Seniors have the highest crash death rate per mile driven, with the exception of teen drivers."

One thing older drivers can do to adapt to factors that affect their driving is to make their vehicles "fit" better.

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Paul Damron gets his vehicle checked by ECU master of science and occupational therapy student, Courtney Smith, Saturday at the Eastern Pines Church of Christ.

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Art Benitez gets his vehicle checked by ECU master of science and occupational therapy student, Sarah Peterson, Saturday at the Eastern Pines Church of Christ.

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One thing older drivers can do to adapt to factors that affect their driving is to make their vehicles “fit” better, Dickerson said.

This was the fourth event in the Car Fit program, a collaboration among the American Society on Aging, AAA, AARP and the American Occupational Therapy Association, Dickerson said.

The occupational therapy expert talked about some of the challenges older drivers face and how simple adjustments can improve comfort, control and safety on the road.

“You want to be sure you can see over the steering wheel,” Dickerson said. “A person might not know how to move the seat forward, or maybe the seat doesn’t move forward enough. That’s where an occupational therapist can help with advice about devices that can be purchased.

“We don’t want seat cushions to be the only option for visual improvement because that might not be the safest adjustment to make, but you certainly have to be able to see above the steering wheel.”

Distance away from the steering wheel is another important consideration

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see above the steering wheel.”

Distance away from the steering wheel is another important consideration.

“We know that air bags exploding out can be fatal for older adults whose bodies are more frail,” Dickerson said. “An older driver should be at least 10 inches away from a steering wheel, but that can put some drivers too far from the floor pedals. That’s where pedal extenders can be considered or some other adjustment that achieves proper distances.”

Newer model cars come off the production line with many more devices, gauges and accessories. It is important that drivers know where they are, how to use them properly, and can reach them comfortably and safely, Dickerson said.

The occupational therapy student volunteers made sure all the signals were known and accessible to drivers who pulled up in their cars.

Another obstacle to safe and comfortable driving for older people is the need to look behind them, usually requiring some amount of neck turning.

“We always tell people they should glance over their shoulders as much as possible when moving backward, but we also show drivers how to adjust mirrors to almost eliminate the blind spot and minimize the need for neck turning,” Dickerson said.

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turning," Dickerson said.

Paul Damron of Greenville brought his old truck to the event Saturday because he always wants to learn something new, he said.

Being 74 years old means having to make adjustments, and driving is part of that reality, Damron said.

"I know I'm slipping; it starts to happen even in your 40s," he said.

"It's unavoidable. My brain knows what my body wants to do, but my body doesn't function like that now."

Getting help from Dickerson and her team of occupational therapists is a smart move, Damron said.

"I'm more comfortable when I have more options," he said.

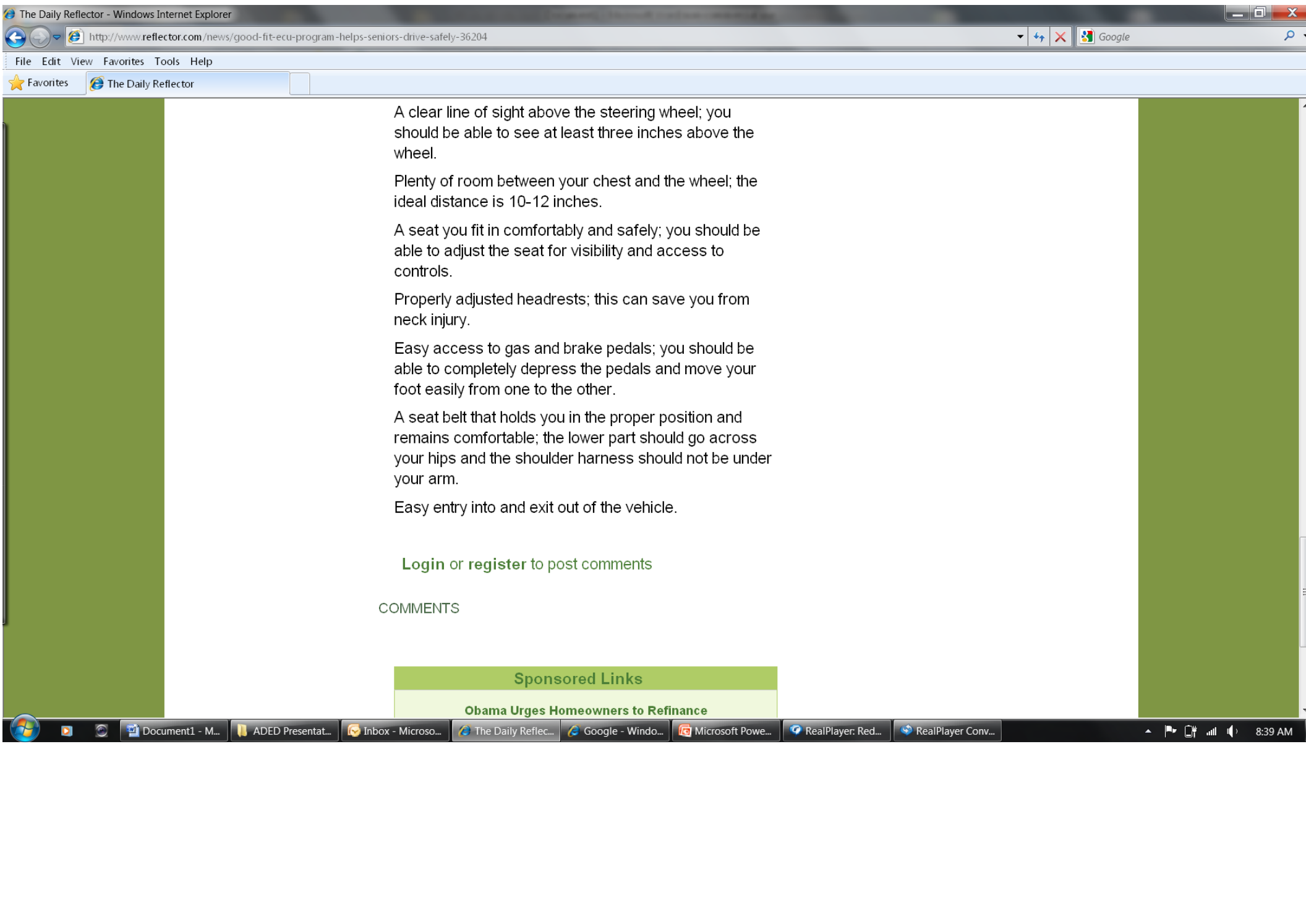
For more information about the Car Fit program, contact a local AARP or AAA office or the American Society on Aging at www.asaging.org.

Contact Michael Abramowitz at mabramowitz@reflector.com or (252) 329-9571.

Car tips

The coalition that put together the Car Fit program said that a good fit between you and your vehicle means you have the following adjustments correctly made:

A clear line of sight above the steering wheel; you should be able to see at least three inches above the wheel.



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Plenty of room between your chest and the wheel; the ideal distance is 10-12 inches.

A seat you fit in comfortably and safely; you should be able to adjust the seat for visibility and access to controls.

Properly adjusted headrests; this can save you from neck injury.

Easy access to gas and brake pedals; you should be able to completely depress the pedals and move your foot easily from one to the other.

A seat belt that holds you in the proper position and remains comfortable; the lower part should go across your hips and the shoulder harness should not be under your arm.

Easy entry into and exit out of the vehicle.

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