

## Sending the right signal to pedestrians

By Times editorial  
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A story in Sunday's St. Petersburg Times illustrated perfectly some of the reasons why this area has such a dismal record of pedestrian deaths and injuries.

- In a county with one of the highest percentages of senior citizens in the nation, a so-called "national standard" is being used to set the timing of crosswalk signals. That standard does not provide sufficient time for many elderly residents to cross streets.

- Older pedestrians - young ones, too - are so spooked by turning traffic, not to mention the well-publicized incidents of pedestrians hit in intersections, that they are abandoning intersection crosswalks and instead crossing at mid block, where motorists are not expecting to see pedestrians.

- There is continuing confusion about what the pedestrian crossing signals, which flash international symbols instead of words, are trying to convey.

The Times story followed the March 25 death of 85-year-old Armando Fallo and the serious injury of his 80-year-old wife, Mary. The two, along with an 85-year-old friend, had walked east across six-lane Missouri Avenue in Largo to go to McDonald's and were going back across Missouri Avenue to their mobile home park about 8:15 p.m.

When the 29 seconds on the pedestrian walk signal ran out, they angled out of the crosswalk to try to reach the sidewalk faster, but the Fallos were hit by an oncoming car whose driver never saw them.

The 29 seconds they were allotted were determined by a national standard that assumes a pedestrian can cover 4 feet per second. Anyone who watches crosswalks in Pinellas County knows that is a pace some elderly pedestrians just can't achieve.

Largo police Sgt. Butch Ward already has asked that the time provided to cross Missouri Avenue at Jasper be extended. The same action likely is necessary at all Missouri Avenue crossings, since that area has several mobile home parks that cater to senior citizens.

However, extended crossing time won't save lives if elderly pedestrians cross at mid block because drivers don't respect crosswalks. Drivers blow through red lights, putting at risk pedestrians who step out as soon as the light changes, or they are so eager to turn right on red at an intersection that they don't give pedestrians time to finish their crossing. The consciousness of motorists needs to be raised. Officers?

And clearly, public safety agencies need to band together to create an education campaign or signage that will explain to pedestrians the meaning of pedestrian crossing signals.

What does the flashing red hand mean? What does it mean when the red hand goes solid? Some signals now display

numbers counting down, but there is no explanation of what the countdown means.

Too many pedestrians see a flashing red hand and think the light is changing immediately. They get confused, stop and go back, or bail out of the crosswalk. They don't know that when the red hand starts flashing, it means the light will soon change and they should not start crossing if they are still on the sidewalk. But pedestrians who are already in the crosswalk have time to finish crossing before the hand goes to solid red and the traffic light changes.

Motorist and pedestrian education, extending walk times, and warning motorists who don't give pedestrians the right of way - all would go a long way toward reducing the risks to our elderly pedestrians.

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