

# The New Old Age

Caring and Coping



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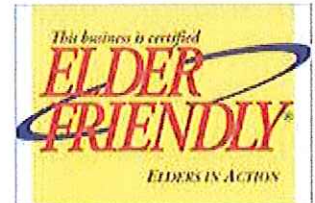
## In Oregon, Elder Sleuths Size Up Local Businesses

By [PAULA SPAN](#)

File under: What a smart idea.

Elders in Action, a nonprofit advocacy group in Portland, Ore., publishes an extensive directory of local businesses certified, after unannounced visits by undercover volunteers in their 60s through 80s, to be elder-friendly.

Auto dealerships, medical practices, moving companies, food markets, travel agents, insurance firms, government agencies — the Elder Friendly Business Certification program has given a literal seal of approval to nearly 300 Portland-area locations.



*Courtesy of Elders in Action  
The seal awarded to “elder-  
friendly” business in  
Portland, Ore.*

It works this way: a local company, possibly noticing the surge in the older population and how much financial clout elders have, requests certification. Small businesses pay \$200, larger ones \$400. (Brief digression: What causes so many innovative concepts in aging, including assisted living, to originate in Oregon? And can we bottle it?)

Over the following two weeks, four trained Elders in Action volunteers separately visit the place, assessing such qualities as physical accessibility, store or office layout, and customer service. “They’re sort of like secret shoppers,” said the group’s executive director, Vicki Hersen.

“We start with the phone book. Is a business easy to find? And we evaluate Web sites for font size and color combinations that are readable,” Ms. Hersen explained. “We call up to see if a real person answers the phone. We say: ‘I don’t drive. How do I get there by bus?’”

The elder spies — about 60 have gone through the four-hour training — check out whether signs and menus are readable. They want to see at least one unisex bathroom, so that a customer can be assisted by an opposite-sex helper or spouse. They want to see chairs up front where older patrons can wait for a taxi or the transit van, and they want those chairs to have arms.

A business that makes the grade gets a decal for its window and can use the insignia in its marketing and advertising. Elders in Action adds the newcomer to its paper and online directory, which grows by about 25 new listings a year.

A business found wanting has six months in which to make improvements before volunteers revisit it. Among those that learned the hard way that Elders in Action means business were the Oregon Zoo (its signs were deemed hard to read) and the Portland Center for the Performing Arts (the low benches outside its auditorium were hard to rise from). Both made changes and earned certification.

As the program grew, Elders in Action began licensing its training, certification process and logo to other nonprofit groups around the country. Sixteen, most of them area agencies on aging, have followed suit. Now Toledo, Ohio; Tulsa, Okla.; Boston; Montgomery, Ala.; and Binghamton, N.Y., among other places, have elder-friendly certification programs. You wonder why there aren't more.

*[Paula Span](#) is the author of "When the Time Comes: Families With Aging Parents Share Their Struggles and Solutions."*