In August 2003, the National Highway Transportation Safety Administration (NHTSA) amended the school bus safety regulations to encourage churches and other groups to use buses instead of vans. Consumer advisories in 2004 and 2005 warned users of 15-passenger vans about an increased risk of rollover under certain conditions. The matter became so serious that in 2005 the federal government stepped in and The 2005 Federal Highway Reauthorization Act prohibits pre-primary, primary, and secondary schools from purchasing, renting, or leasing new 15-passenger vans to be used to transport students to and from school and school-related activities.

If you are currently using 15-passenger vans, you should budget now to replace them. They should be taken out of service and replaced with small school buses as soon as possible. Small school buses carry about the same number of passengers but have far more stable operating characteristics.

If you make decide to continue operating 15-passenger vans, it is critical that you hire trained drivers who possess a CDL. It is recommended that rear seats be removed to limit the passenger capacity to fewer than nine, as this will lower the center of gravity and dramatically reduce the risk of rollover. Shift the weight of passengers toward the front of the vehicle to reduce loading behind the vehicle’s rear axle.

Prior to operating the van for each shift, conduct a full safety inspection of the vehicle, especially tire condition and proper tire pressure. Require all passengers and the driver to wear proper safety restraints any time the vehicle is in motion.

Finally review the road conditions where the van will be operating. Road shoulders with sharp drop-offs and potholes need to be avoided as they tend to exaggerate the high center of gravity and increase the potential of rollover.

A great resource for transportation safety information topics: http://www.nhtsa.gov

Fifteen-passenger vans are large vans intended to transport up to 15 people, including the driver. The federal government classifies 15-passenger vans as buses for the purpose of vehicle safety standards (49 CFR 571.3(b)).

National Highway Transportation Safety Administration reports that passengers who travel in 15-passenger vans are more likely to die in crashes; the death rate for all occupants, not just drivers, was higher for 15-passenger vans than for other passenger vehicle types combined—149 versus 121 deaths per million registered vehicles.

Fifty-six percent of the deaths of occupants of 15-passenger vans occur in single-vehicle rollover crashes. No other vehicle was involved! These accidents were the direct result of the design characteristics of the vehicle and inability of the driver to compensate for those characteristics. Inexperienced drivers have difficulty negotiating corners and performing other maneuvers because 15-passenger vans have high centers of gravity, making them less stable. Adding more passengers raises the center of gravity making them increasingly less stable. The odds of rollover for a 15-passenger van increased more than 400 percent when fully loaded compared with a driver traveling alone. Between 2005 and 2009, 42 percent of the rollover deaths in 15-passenger vans occurred in vans carrying at least 10 occupants.

Anyone who possesses a valid driver’s license can operate a 15-passenger van, whereas drivers of vans carrying 16 or more passengers are required to have a Commercial Drivers License (CDL).

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