

Perils of 15-passenger vans

by Nishtha Mehta

Many transit agencies use 15-passenger vans to transport their riders. However, because of the high incidence of accidents involving these vans, it is important for agencies to be aware of the unique safety problems of these vehicles. This article

turned, killing three students. —In the summer of 2000, one student and teacher driver were killed in Arizona as a passenger van carrying 10 students veered off the highway and overturned.

Research conducted by the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration (NHTSA) indicates that 15-passenger vans are involved in more single-vehicle accidents involving rollovers than any other

The rear-ward shift (along with the placement of rear tires) increases the propensity of the van to fishtail. The lack of structural integrity, non-laminated side windows, and inadequate crash-padding add to the hazards associated with these vehicles.

By the law...

The Motor Vehicle Safety Amendments Act of 1974 is a federal law that prohibits the sale of new vehicles with a capacity of more than 10 passengers to schools unless the vehicle meets federal school bus safety standards; 15-passenger vans



More information about the **Moving Kids Safely in Child Care** program conducted by Kansas Safe Kids can be found by calling their office and talking with Cherie Sage, the regional coordinator, at (785) 296-0351. More information about the **Defensive Driving for Van-Drivers** course conducted by National Safety Council, Kansas can be found by calling their office and talking with Kathie Holman at (816) 842-5223, extension 222.

will describe these problems and discuss steps transit agencies can take to reduce risks.

Danger on wheels

Between 1990 and 2001, 1,576 15-passenger vans were involved in fatal crashes that resulted in 1,111

passenger vehicle. The risk of rollover in such vans also increases with an increase in the number of passengers. When carrying less than five passengers, the risk of overturning is 12.3 percent. This risk increases to 70 percent when the van is filled to capacity.

In 2002, Ben Hogan, of Hogan Law Office P.C. Alabama, conducted a study to test the safety of 15-passen-

ger vans. Hogan found that several factors contribute to making these vans highly unsafe. 15-passenger vans have a high center of gravity even when empty, and this center shifts higher and rear-ward as more occupants board the vehicle. The upward shift of the center of gravity increases the overturning tendency of the van.

do not meet these standards, unless modified.

A few states have banned the use of 15-passenger vans for all school-related transportation. Kansas has enacted a similar law that goes into effect on July 1, 2005. Larry Bluthardt, of the Kansas Department of Education's School Bus Safety Unit, says that Kansas Department of Transportation requires vehicle guidelines to be followed by school districts and non-public schools. These guidelines include that no vehicle, other than a school bus, shall be used to transport more than 10 individuals, including the driver, at a given time. If a certain school district or non-public school already purchased a vehicle, such as a 15-passenger van, before July 1, 2001, they can operate the vehicle until July 1, 2005 after which

Most van-related accidents are caused by inexperienced drivers.

fatalities among occupants of the vans. Some examples:

—On July 20, 2002, a Ford 15-passenger van transporting college cheerleaders overturned after the rear tire lost its tread.

—On September 24, 2001, a 1990 Dodge van transporting college students in Marianna, Florida over-

Lower your risk when using a 15-passenger van

- Conduct maintenance checks and procedures. All essential systems, including brakes, exhaust, fuel, steering, tires and suspension, should be in good working condition.
- Hire qualified drivers. Create a list of the qualifications necessary for a 15-passenger van driver and use it as a checklist before employing drivers. The checklist can contain questions regarding load distribution in such vehicles, familiarity with all road rules, and previous experience driving these vans.
- Do not transport more than 10 passengers at a given time. 15-passenger vans are more prone to accidents when filled to capacity.
- Remove the rear seats to reduce loading behind the vehicle's rear axle.
- Strictly enforce the wearing of safety belts for both drivers and riders.
- Educate drivers about what causes rollovers and the importance of driving at lower speeds.
- Include safety items on board, including fire extinguishers, first-aid kits and communication devices.

Source: "Public Citizen's Advice to Owners of 15-Passenger Vans," *Public Citizen* Web site: www.citizen.org/autosafety/passengervan/articles.cfm?ID=8917.

operation will be prohibited by law. So in short, by the time you read this, the use of 15-passenger vans by schools to transport children will be prohibited in Kansas.

This law, while not directly applicable to transit agencies, sheds

operated by experienced drivers holding a commercial drivers license. The advisory also included information regarding risk of rollovers and safety measures.

In November 2002, NHTSA, in partnership with the Health

The use of 15-passenger vans by schools to transport children is now prohibited in Kansas.

light on the problems associated with transporting riders in these vehicles. This brings us the question of what transit agencies can do and what resources are available to them to promote safe use of these vans.

Take action!

NHTSA has been involved with several actions and steps associated with the safe use of 15-passenger vans. In April 2001, an advisory issued by NHTSA informed the public that these vans should only be

Resources and Services Administration and the American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP), announced a training program for child care providers called Moving Kids Safely in Child Care. This two-day program trains child care providers on how to safely transport children using age-appropriate restraints, and on the benefits of using buses rather than 15-passenger vans. The program can be adapted to the specific needs of a transit agency. It is available through the state high-

way safety offices, including the Kansas SAFE KIDS Program, which is a nonprofit coalition of over 60 statewide and regional organizations and businesses, including the Kansas Department of Transportation (see sidebar at left for some safety tips from NHTSA, published at the *Public Citizen's* Web site).

According to John Drees, program coordinator for Safe Kids Douglas County, most van-related accidents are caused by inexperienced drivers. Kansas is addressing this problem through a training program aptly named Defensive Driving for Van Drivers. This course, conducted by the National Safety Council's (NSC) Kansas Chapter, prepares drivers to operate all vans, including 15-passenger vans. Kathie Holman, the program coordinator for this course, says courses can be conducted on-site for companies and are also taught as open classes, depending on the number of students. There is also an added financial incentive for participating in this program as all the students can obtain a discount on their personal auto insurance, per Kansas law.

Kansas Rural Transit Assistance Program (RTAP) also provides training using the NSC's "Coaching the Van Driver" program. For more information on this program, call the Kansas RTAP office and talk with Pat Weaver at (785) 864-2595.

In sum...

According to Drees, many of the accidents involving these vans can be prevented if certain precautions are taken. It's important to: 1) understand that these vans are larger, heavier vehicles and 2) employ all available safety measures to reduce the risks associated with them. Transit agencies should attempt to hire well-trained, experienced drivers, and use the resources available

Go to page 14

15-passenger vans,

continued from page 11

to them through the various programs offered in the state to lower risks for all road users.

Sources

NHTSA Action Plan for 15-Passenger Van Safety, National Highway Traffic Safety Administration, November 2004. <http://www.nhtsa.dot.gov/cars/problems/studies/15PassVans/15passvan.html>.

Public Citizen's Advice to Owners of 15-Passenger Vans. Public Citizens, National Non Profit Public Interest Organization, January 30, 2004. <http://www.citizen.org/autosafety/passengervan/articles.cfm?ID=8917>.

"15-Passenger Vans: High Riding Death Traps," *University of Alberta Safety Forum*, 2004. <http://www.biology.ualberta.ca/>

facilities/safety/uploads/doc/Safetyforum_com_15pvans.htm.

Craft, Nick, *Transporting the Children in Your Care: Ensuring Occupant Safety*, Center for Early Childhood Leadership, National-Louise University, Fall 2004.

"Transportation of Pupils, School Bus Required," *Kansas State Department of Education School Transportation Regulations Standards, Statutes and Guidelines*, Kansas Statutes Annotated 72-8318, September 2003. <http://www.ksbe.state.ks.us/schoolbus/ksderegs.htm#72-8318>.

Transporting our children safely in fifteen-passenger vans, Christian Law Association, 2003. http://www.christianlaw.org/15-passenger_vans.html. ▲