

Drive Safely: Transporting Participants Without Incident

Resource Type: Articles

Topic: Facility, Program and Transportation Safety

According to the National Association of Fleet Administrators, 20 percent of fleet drivers will be involved in a vehicle accident annually, at an astounding price tag of \$18 billion to U.S. employers. Certain types of accidents — such as when a van flips over — seem to occur with increasing frequency. These tragedies attract the media spotlight and should draw attention from nonprofit managers, as well. A serious accident involving a van that has flipped over occurs every other week.

With rare exceptions, all community-serving nonprofits are exposed to losses stemming from vehicle accidents. While some nonprofits rely solely on volunteers and staff driving their own vehicles, a large number of nonprofits own or periodically rent passenger-vans, mini-buses, and trucks. Without a transportation program in which clients are transported to service sites or caregivers drive themselves to client locations, the missions of many social services agencies would be in jeopardy.

According to Dale Wheeler and Helene Browning of Zurich Risk Engineering, there are three keys to keeping nonprofit fleets — and the passengers they transport — safe:

- written fleet safety program;
- careful driver selection, training and supervision; and
- appropriate vehicle selection, inspection and maintenance.

Large Vehicles, Big Danger

Many nonprofits have acquired 15-passenger vans in their efforts to affordably transport large groups of campers, seniors, athletes and church members. In most states, the 15-passenger van is the largest vehicle that an individual with a regular state-issued driver's license may drive. Currently there are more than 500,000 15-passenger vans being used by nonprofits, private businesses and government agencies.

There are several characteristics of 15-passenger vans that make them dangerous:

- A loaded 15-passenger van has a 35 percent rollover risk, compared to a 10 percent rollover risk for a typical passenger car.
- Large passenger vans can tip over while traveling at relatively modest speeds (e.g., 30 MPH).
- 15-passenger vans do not handle as passenger cars do, yet they are generally driven by people without truck-driving experience.
- The center of gravity on a 15-passenger van is high and towards the rear of the vehicle, heightening the risk of rollover when the van is fully-loaded.
- 15-passenger vans are basically modified cargo vans. They are not constructed to provide adequate protection for passengers in the event of an accident.

Risk Management Strategies

- Do not include 15-passenger vans in your nonprofit's fleet, and if already using these vehicles, develop a plan to replace them with mini-vans and mini-buses.

- Keep in mind that if you follow the suggested van modification tips listed below, you will no longer have a vehicle that holds an entire athletic team plus its cargo. And while a 15-passenger van may have been an inexpensive vehicle when purchased some years ago, that cost is probably overshadowed by the skyrocketing cost of insurance on these vehicles and the potential costs your nonprofit will face if one of your vans is involved in an accident. When considering all costs, purchasing two smaller vehicles — such as mini-vans or a small mini-bus — may become an affordable option.

Plan B

If it is financially impractical or impossible to replace your 15-passenger vans at this time, consider the following steps:

- Consider removing the last row of seats in the van and filling the space with a cage or other obstruction that makes it impossible to load cargo where the final row of seats was once located.
- Develop written guidelines concerning the loading of cargo in the van. These guidelines should prohibit the loading of cargo on top of the van (remove the luggage rack, if applicable) or in the rear of the van.
- Seat passengers in front of the rear axle. Limiting weight and placing it as far forward as possible lowers the van's center of gravity and reduces the risk of rollovers.
- Train van drivers to conduct pre-trip inspections of vans before every trip. These inspections should include a check of tire pressure (tire failure is a leading cause of van accidents — include a tire gauge in the pre-trip inspection kit), verification that all seatbelts are in working condition, a check of all safety equipment (e.g., mirrors, lights, horn).
- Prohibit van drivers from driving over 55 MPH.
- Train drivers before letting them drive 15-passenger vans. This training should include a segment on the dangers of distracted driving, and how the driver should handle passenger disruptions.
- Consider installing an after-market addition for rear leaf springs that improves vehicle control, safety and stability. Roadmaster Active Suspension system is one such product designed to reduce the incidence of rollovers in 15-passenger vans. For information and a videotape, call Bud Clark, national marketing manager, 800-398-5036, or visit www.activesuspension.com.

Nonprofits that transport clients and caregivers should strive to integrate a wide range of safety measures in their transportation programs. Doing so is more than good PR for your agency; it improves the odds that your precious cargo will arrive safely and be there to receive or deliver services for many years to come.

Hungry for More?

Here are some Web sites that offer additional information about safety, hazards, and alternative choices to 15-passenger vans.

- **Public Citizen — National Nonprofit Public Interest Organization** Article: *15-Passenger Vans Hazard Information*. Includes 15 links to more information.
- **National Highway Traffic Safety Administration — NHTSA** Article: *The Rollover Propensity of Fifteen-Passenger Vans* www.citizen.org/documents/NHTSAResearchNote1.pdf
- **Collins Industries Inc. — A Non-Conforming Van Replacement Program** Article: *A Safer Choice Has Just arrived*, and links to three other van safety articles.