

Safety is Not a Luxury: Understanding the Risks of Passenger Vans

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Large passenger vans, especially those that seat fifteen people, are a popular method of transportation for many nonprofits because they are size-efficient and cost-effective. Church groups, youth sports teams, student groups, and summer camps and other seasonal activity organizers often utilize these vans, and so do other organizations that need to move groups of clients, volunteers or staff members. While the utility of a multi-passenger van is undeniable in many situations, so are the potential risks associated with using these vehicles to transport staff, volunteers and clientele. In order to protect the people who serve—and benefit from—your mission from these potentially serious risks, it is essential to understand the hazards that these vehicles present, how to avoid them, and alternatives that could quite literally save lives.

Risky Business

Because of their size, specifically the greater length and width than most vehicles, large passenger vans such as 15-passenger vans are particularly sensitive to overloading. Although all vehicles and types of transportation have suggested weight limits, passenger vans may be especially dangerous to overload.

In 2001, the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration (NHTSA) published original research indicating that 15-passenger vans, especially those that are heavily loaded with passengers or other cargo, are at a high risk of rollover. Preventing rollovers and other transportation risks involving passenger vans requires understanding the factors that contribute to the risks, such as:

- **Number of Occupants**—15- passenger vans with fewer than 10 occupants have been found to be three times less likely to roll over than those with 10 or more occupants. Vans with the driver as the only occupant are five times less likely to rollover.
- **Speed**—The odds of rolling over are about five times greater on high-speed roads (50+ mph) compared to low-speed roads (under 50 mph).
- **Road Curvature**—The chance of rolling over on a curved road is two times higher than on a straight or nearly straight road.
- **Heavy Loading**—Because passenger vans have a center of gravity that shifts up and to the back, rollover risk increases as the weight of the vehicle nears its GVWR.
- **Adverse Weather**—As is true for car accidents generally, poor road conditions, particularly wet roads, can contribute to the risk of rollover.
- **Improperly Inflated Tires**—Another [NHTSA study](#) found that 74% of 15-passenger vans (and 68% of other vans) had at least one tire underinflated by 25% or more. This is significant because underinflated tires are at higher risk of a blowout, which leads to a lack of driver control, and ultimately, a potential rollover.
- **Lack of Restraint Use**—Although the risk of rollover is not related to this factor, it plays a major role in whether injuries are significant. A NHTSA 2004 analysis of crash data indicated that over 75% of fatalities in single-vehicle accidents (rollovers) were individuals who were not wearing seatbelts.

Weigh Your Responsibilities

When choosing a vehicle to use for your nonprofit's operations, be aware of the vehicle's Gross Vehicle Weight Rating (GVWR). The GVWR is the recommended upper limit of weight for the vehicle with all cargo, including people. If you are going to be towing another vehicle or trailer, also be aware of the Gross Combination Weight Rating (GCWR), which is the recommended total upper limit of all GVWRs involved in the vehicle combination. Both of these ratings may be found in the vehicle user manual, and the GVWR can also be found on the driver's side door frame of the vehicle.

Tips for Safe Trips

While countless transportation and safety organizations, insurance groups, and even governmental agencies have warned against using large passenger vehicles such as 15-passenger vans, they continue to be a popular choice for many nonprofits organizations. If another method of transportation is not an option for your nonprofit, understanding what preventive and protective measures can be put in place to avoid rollover and other potentially fatal accidents is a must. The National Highway Traffic Safety Administration (NHTSA) provides the following tips for using a 15-passenger van:

- **Be Aware of Occupancy**—Never allow more than 15 people to ride in a 15-passenger van. If all the seats are not occupied, make sure that passengers are sitting only in forward seats, to increase the stability of the vehicle.
- **Use Experienced Drivers**—Make sure your driver has appropriate experience and training prior to allowing them to operate a 15-passenger van on behalf of your organization. Because of the size of the vehicle, the handling and control can be quite different than other vehicles. Even though a commercial driver's license (CDL) is not required to operate a 15-passenger van, permitting an inexperienced or untrained staff member to drive one on your nonprofit's behalf is ill-advised. Team members who have never driven a 15-passenger van should not be permitted to 'learn the ropes' while putting your staff and clients in danger.
- **Load Cargo Smartly**—Similarly to occupants, cargo should be loaded forward of the rear axle of the vehicle to increase stability and control. Never permit the placement of cargo on the roof or use of a tow-hitch and trailer behind the van.

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- **Perform Regular Maintenance**— Periodically inspect your vehicles for wear, and always ensure that the tire pressure is appropriate for the weather conditions, the number of occupants, and in line with the recommended PSI found in the vehicle's manual. If you use vans on a regular basis, make tire pressure a part of the periodic maintenance inspection, and keep a log to ensure that appropriate maintenance is being done.
- **Establish and Uphold Policies**— Organization-specific policies on the use of vans, and restrictions on the driver can help increase safe travel for your organization. For example, drivers should be well-rested, the use of handheld and hands-free mobile phones while driving should be strictly prohibited, and authorized drivers should be encouraged to limit all distractions, such as talking, eating and adjusting the radio. If you use vans for long-distance trips, adopt a clear, conservative policy on the number of straight hours the driver can drive the van without a replacement.
- **Replace Tires on a Regular Basis**—Avoid using old spare tires to replace primary tires, and replace tires at least every five years, if not more frequently. Routinely carrying heavy cargo places a lot of strain on van tires, and inspecting tires can prevent dangerous tire blow-outs, loss of driver control, and accidents.
- **Keep the Vehicle within the GVWR**—The Gross Vehicle Weight Rating (GVWR) is "the amount recommended by the manufacturer as the upper limit to the operational weight for a motor vehicle and any cargo (human or other) to be carried." The GVWR is different for every van model, so always double-check the vehicle manual before loading the van.

Safe and Sound

Many nonprofit leaders mistakenly assume that driving large passenger vans is no different than driving a personal car, pick-up truck or minivan, and may allow volunteers or staff members to assume driving responsibilities with little to no training. However, large vans handle much differently than other vehicles, even large pick-up trucks or SUVs. Whether the drive is five minutes or five hours, make sure that your drivers (and passengers, too!) are properly trained and aware of the following safety procedures.

- Drive in the right-hand lane whenever possible.
- When weather and road conditions are good, maintain at least four seconds behind other traffic. When weather and conditions are bad, maintain a minimum distance of six seconds.
- Always exercise care to avoid being in another vehicle's blind spots.
- Remember that the biggest blind spot is directly behind the vehicle, so avoid backing up whenever possible.
- Slow down and drive cautiously, especially on rural or curving roads.
- Keep in mind that the posted speed limit is intended to be safe for smaller passenger cars, not 15-passenger vans. Consider driving under the speed limit.
- Never exceed 60 miles per hour when driving a 15-passenger van.
- Avoid panicked steering and hard braking; if an emergency occurs while on the road, focus on slowing down gently and pulling over in a safe manner if possible.
- Never load items on top of the vehicle or tow a trailer.
- Distribute passengers or materials evenly on the left and right sides and insist that passengers sit towards the front of the vehicle to maintain appropriate balance and stability.
- Develop a written safety policy for van use that includes an evacuation plan; review and update the policy at least annually, and always after an accident or near-accident. If your nonprofit regularly or intermittently uses large passenger vans, make sure you have put in place strategies and policies to make their use as safe as possible. If possible, consider using other vehicles as an alternative to large passenger vans, such as:
 - Vehicles with dual rear wheels (two wheels on each end of the rear axle)
 - Vehicles that meet Federal school bus regulations
 - Keep in mind that when transporting high school or younger students, you must use vehicles that meet these regulations
 - If renting a bus, ask the leasing agency to verify that the leased vehicle meet this standard
- Mini-buses and smaller vans

As a result of the risks presented by large vans such as 15-passenger vans, many universities, churches, and other organizations in both the nonprofit and for-profit sectors have banned 15-passenger vans and replaced them with alternative forms of transportation. Next time you are looking for a large vehicle to transport your clients or employees, consider choosing an alternative. Remember, safety is not a luxury.

RESOURCES:

- 12 & 15 Passenger Vans Tire Pressure Study: Preliminary Results, Traffic Safety Facts Research Note, May 2005, www.nhtsa.dot.gov.
- Analysis of Crashes Involving 15-Passenger Vans, NHTSA Technical Report, May 2004
- What You Need to Know About School Bus Regulations, www.nhtsa.gov/Driving+Safety/School+Buses/school-busesfrequently-asked-questions