

The Redwoods Group Insurance Program for YMCAs

Risk Management Alert

Topic: 15-Passenger Vans... use or not use?

Summer travel activity has again raised the subject of 15-passenger vans in the media. While National Highway Traffic Safety Administration (NHTSA) administrator Jeffery Runge states that there is “nothing inherently unsafe” about them, the press and many consumer and auto safety advocacy groups strongly disagree. Their outspokenness, coupled with earlier federal studies and statute changes (see also RMA - Are vans a viable transportation option) and recent serious incidents are creating the public perception that the use of such vehicles to transport children is both patently dangerous and foolhardy. Why?

- ✓ a 15-passenger van has a higher center of gravity than many other passenger vehicles
- ✓ each additional passenger raises that center of gravity
- ✓ the flat sides of the van contribute to instability in crosswinds, a significant factor in rollover potential
- ✓ the structural rigidity of the vehicle was designed for the less demanding rigors of transporting cargo
- ✓ vans have recently been involved in several serious incidents that were highly visible because they were transporting groups of children, teams, or well-known individuals.

That accident history would be different if the training and licensing (commercial driver’s license, also known as a CDL) requirements necessary for driving a bus were required for driving a van. **Most of the major incidents involving 15-passenger vans have been attributed to the driver and his or her lack of experience, instruction, and concentration.** Thus, part of the fault lies not with the vehicle but with the laws that do not adequately restrict the use of the vehicle to properly qualified individuals. Obviously, the most important issue is a properly trained driver, whatever form of conveyance is chosen.

The most viable option as a replacement vehicle is the small school bus. Though also having a similar high center of gravity and flat sides, it is more stable because of a longer and wider wheelbase. Other safety factors are increased by stronger floor design, seat anchoring, and an elevated floor position that allows smaller vehicles to impact it below the passenger compartment. Challenges include its exemption from mandated seatbelt legislation (which necessitates the specification of optional seatbelts) and the need for a CDL to operate one. Even with challenges, their use should be seriously considered.

Whether or not an association chooses to fight public opinion and accept the clear safety risks presented by 15-passenger vans must be decided by the association, but such a battle must be chosen carefully, as the association serves, exists within, and ultimately depends upon its local community. Even though reason or statutes might not (yet) require a change from using 15-passenger vans, such a change may be the prudent choice. In the mean time, our next RMA will guide you on the best ways to manage the risk during the time when you use these vans.

Please call us at 800-463-8546 to discuss this or any other risk management safety tip, or visit our web site at <http://www.redwoodsgroup.com> to learn more about YMCA risk management related issues.