

The Redwoods Group Insurance Program for YMCAs

LESSONS IN THE NEWS • 2007-09

Although this article does not deal directly with YMCAs, it discusses an issue very germane to YMCA practices.

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[State] teen dies in [interstate highway] tragedy

RURAL NE AREA, 08/06/2007 – [Victim] was comfortable in his seat, but when a taller fellow summer camper asked him to move, the affable 15-year-old didn't hesitate.

That [victim] is dead today, and his friend suffered only scratches, likely will haunt the Orthodox Jewish passengers — 10 boys ages 14 to 18 from [two widely separated states] and two camp counselors — who survived when the 15-passenger van they were in overturned Monday on Interstate 95.

"It shows how generous he was," accident survivor [name], 17, of [city], said Monday. "It shows that if your time comes, your time comes. One minute you're here, the next you're not."

Almost all of the campers were asleep, about 10 hours into traveling from [camp] in [state], when the accident occurred at 7 a.m. near northbound mile marker [number].

The van veered into the median, went back across the road and down the sloped embankment, rolling over at least once and ejecting at least one occupant before it came to rest on its tires. A trailer carrying five canoes broke away from the van and stopped about 50 feet south of the vehicle near woods along the highway, State Police Lt. [name] said.

"It was pretty scary," passenger [name] said. "We were flying all over the floor and bleeding. All the windows were shattered."

The survivors were taken to [Name] Medical Center and [Name] Hospital in [city]. Driver [name], 22, and passengers [name] and [name] remained hospitalized. [Driver] underwent surgery at [medical center] on Monday, [state police lieutenant] said.

Most passengers were not wearing seat belts, said camper [name], 16, [city, state].

The camping party was planning to canoe the [name] River, camp at [name] State Park near [town] and hike Mount [name] as part of a two-week trip to [state].

Boarding a privately chartered jet at [city] International Airport on Monday night to take them and [victim]'s body back to [city, state], the teens seemed slightly uncomprehending about their close call.

They "seem to be doing very well, considering," said [name], a lay leader of [city]'s [synagogue] who was called to [medical center] to help tend to the teens' spiritual state.

"Every time I would talk to them and ask them how they were doing they would say, 'Good, Baruch Hashem [thank God].'" [lay leader] said.

[Name], 56, of [small city], an inspector for the Occupational Safety and Health Administration in [city], was the second passer-by to stop at the accident scene. He arrived a minute after it happened. The first passer-by called 911, and [OSHA inspector] helped the victims until an ambulance — the first of seven called to the scene — arrived.

"I observed three men waving for someone to stop, so I stopped," said [OSHA inspector], who is trained in first aid. "I saw one person in the van who could not get out, who was bleeding from the face. He had to be removed by the Jaws of Life. I saw others on the ground.



"Some had cuts and bruises and others obviously had broken bones," [OSHA inspector] said. "There were several who were in shock but did not have life-threatening injuries. They didn't know what had happened to them."

[Name], [camper]'s father, said his son told him that "he was going crazy, had completely broke down, at the accident scene."

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"The driver [name] asked him to hold his head," [father] added, "and [camper] said, 'If I touch you, and you're spinally injured, I could really hurt you.'"

The cause of the accident is unknown. State police accident reconstruction specialists, forensic evidence technicians, detectives and a coroner were at the scene until almost 2 p.m., said [name], state police spokesman. One northbound lane of I-95 was closed for most of the morning.

"We hope to interview the driver as soon as we can," [state police lieutenant] said.

The van, canoes, and debris were removed for examination, [state police spokesman] said.

As the victims arrived and were treated at [medical center], hospital workers, [lay leader] and several members of [name] and [name] synagogues worked to make them comfortable. [Lay leader] replaced yarmulkes, shoes and tefillin lost in the accident, he said.

Hospital workers obtained kosher food from [restaurant] of

[city], which [lay leader] said is the only kosher restaurant in the city. Synagogue members planned to be at [city] International Airport last night and today to meet the victims' relatives.

"We won't know who they are, but I think we'll be able to recognize them," [lay leader] said, in reference to the yarmulkes Orthodox Jews typically wear.

Family members had started to arrive at the hospital at about 5 p.m., said [name], a clinical psychologist at [name] Psychiatric Center in [city] and a member of [synagogue].

The hospital was arranging to have visiting relatives stay at [motel] and providing them with rental cars, officials said.

The survivors expressed profuse thanks for the kindness they had received.

"You have to import some of your personalities here to [city]," said [name], a [city] paramedic who came to [city] to help transport injured survivors. "People here really have heart."

WHAT WE KNOW:

- There were 13 14-to-18-year-old campers in the vehicle (*verified by other sources*) plus the two counselors, plus gear – the van was fully loaded.
- They were towing a trailer with several canoes.
- They were traveling on the interstate where the speed limit is 65mph – their actual speed is undetermined but it is probable that they were in that general vicinity.
- They drove all night – at the time of the accident (7am) they reportedly had been traveling for 10 hours. Given the start time, it is likely that they began the journey after already having been awake for 12 or more hours.
- Most of the campers were not wearing their seatbelts – one was thrown from the vehicle during the accident.
- The van had no markings identifying it as a camp vehicle – it may have been rented, though that probably is not the case as most rental vehicles are not equipped with trailer hitches and most rental agreements forbid the towing of trailers. (*verified as camp vehicle by other sources*)

WHAT WE MUST REMEMBER:

- 12- and 15-passenger vans are very susceptible to overturn, especially when operated at or near weight capacity – passengers sit on seats, not on the floor, raising the vehicle's already high center of gravity
- 12- and 15-passenger vans' susceptibility to overturn can be exacerbated by towing trailers.
- 12- and 15-passenger vans are more susceptible to overturn the faster they go – statistics show that they are significantly more prone to overturn at speeds of 50mph and higher.
- 12- and 15 passenger vans' relative lack of structural integrity (when compared to a passenger vehicle) often results in more serious injuries from side-impact and roll-over accidents because of seating compartment crushing or deformation allowed by the reduced strength

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- Night is the most dangerous driving time for many reasons: fatigue, increased number of alcohol-impaired drivers, and most importantly, significantly reduced visibility
- Seatbelts save lives – their use is also mandated by law in most jurisdictions
- The best way to deal with 12- and 15-passenger vans is to simply stop using them – totally
 - Dispose of all 12- and 15-passenger vans that you own, rent, or lease
 - Do not purchase, lease, rent, borrow, or use any 12- or 15-passenger vans for transporting staff or program participants in the future
 - Clearly communicate the above point to all staff and all volunteers – make it part of both staff and volunteer orientations so the issue does not arise in the future. Small specialty groups with volunteer leadership (gymnastics, swimming, etc.) historically have used these vehicles and without clear direction may be unaware of the dangers.
- For some, disposing of these vehicles cannot be done overnight – that is understandable, but it also should not take years to accomplish – the stakes are too high and there are too many viable options available for their replacement. Some are probably used so rarely that they do not justify their invested capital and on-going insurance costs.
- The following measures will reduce the potential for tragedy during the transition to replacement vehicles:
 - Remove the rear seat and do not store anything heavy behind the rear seat – weight behind the rear axle increases the potential for overturn and each additional person's weight raises the vehicle's center of gravity (statistics show a drastic increase in overturn potential for more than 10 passengers).
 - Remove any roof racks – storage on top of the vehicle increases its center of gravity, one of the primary factors in overturn potential
 - Remove any trailer hitch – towing a trailer increases the potential for overturn
 - Use the vehicles only for local transportation on surface streets – avoid highway and limited access roadway driving – keep speeds at 45mph or slower
 - Restrict driving of these units to individuals who are thoroughly familiar with their handling characteristics and who have completed a van safety driving course in the last couple of years – verify each driver's skill level in these vehicles before allowing them to transport passengers and do not allow unauthorized drivers to use these vehicles.
 - If practical, equip the vehicles with speed monitors that both warn the driver if the preset speed is exceeded and provides notification for management if it is exceeded for too long an interval.
- Several manufacturers now market 10-passenger vans – these are basically the same vehicles as the 12- or 15-passenger with a different seating configuration. Keep your passengers safe – transport them in passenger car vehicles (which includes mini-vans) and buses or mini-buses that meet Federal Motor Carrier Safety Standards 220, 221, and 222 for school buses.

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.