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Wednesday, July 16, 2003

Feds call for safer big vans

Investigators recommend more seat belts, stronger roofs, more training for chauffeurs

By Jeff Plungis / *Detroit News Washington Bureau*

WASHINGTON -- Federal safety investigators on Tuesday recommended that 15-passenger vans -- popular with school and church groups -- be equipped with additional safety belts and stronger roofs to prevent injuries during accidents, especially rollovers.

Investigators also called for better training and licensing for drivers, who are often ill-equipped to handle the vehicles when fully loaded with passengers and cargo during an emergency or abrupt maneuver.

The National Transportation Safety Board made the findings following a two-year investigation into high-profile van crashes in Texas and North Carolina.

"We have identified a gap in (federal safety) rules," said NTSB Chairwoman Ellen Engleman. "We have a vehicle designated as a bus, but structurally, it's not built to the same safety standards as a bus."

Engleman also said the vans have been engineered and marketed outside the parameters of the safety standards that apply to a commercial vehicle.

"(These vans) are sold essentially as a passenger vehicle on a dealer's lot, but its design characteristics as well as the driving characteristics are quite different from that of a passenger vehicle," she said.

The board is recommending that the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration require the same standards for interior padding and roof strength to 15-passenger vans as well as cars. The NTSB only has the power to recommend changes to vehicle safety regulations. They must be implemented and enforced by the NHTSA.

The board also called on [Ford Motor Co.](#) and [General Motors Corp.](#), the only manufacturers currently selling large vans, to voluntarily adopt new designs while NHTSA completes new regulations.

"We will look closely at what the NTSB is asking us to do," said Ford spokeswoman Carolyn Brown. "If and where appropriate, we will respond to them. We believe it is a very safe vehicle as it is today. People need to understand they are not cars. They have a higher center of gravity.

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Making vans safer

Recommendations by the National Transportation Safety Board:

- * Install lap-and-shoulder seat belts in all seating positions and make the belts more accessible.

- * Improve interior and strengthen roofs to prevent head injuries during rollovers.

- * Require drivers to be instructed on how to react to tire failure, emergency braking and lane changes.

- * Encourage states to adopt license endorsements for 15-passenger vans.

- * Improve maintenance oversight that includes tire wear.

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They should wear safety belts and avoid excessive maneuvers."

To improve handling and reduce rollovers, the NTSB earlier recommended the installation of electronic stability control technology on 15-passenger vans. GM will make the device standard on all Chevrolet Express and GMC Savana vans during the 2004 model year.

GM spokesman Jim Schell said the automaker also was voluntarily applying the interior padding requirements to the vans.

"We'll need to review the other recommendations and determine what to do as we move forward," Schell said.

The NTSB also called for a single licensing standard and better driver training to reduce accidents involving 15-passenger vans used by church and school groups. The board said drivers needed special training to keep the vehicles under control in case of tire failure or other emergency situations. One possibility is that states could issue special drivers' licenses for the vans.

"We've shown even a professional driver can, under these circumstances, have difficulty regaining control of the vehicle," Engleman said. The 18 recommendations, released at a Washington hearing, also include the installation of lap and shoulder belts for each seating position and rules to avoid underinflated tires.

The board reviewed church-group accidents in 2001 involving DaimlerChrysler AG's Dodge Ram vans in which five people died after tires failed and the vehicles rolled over.

One crash the board studied, involving a van carrying 11 members of the First Assembly of God Church of Burkburnett, Texas, was the subject of a high-profile lawsuit late last year. The case was settled for an undisclosed amount on the night before opening arguments were scheduled.

According to NHTSA, a van with at least 10 passengers is nearly three times as likely to roll over than when carrying five or fewer passengers. When carrying 15 or more passengers, the vans were almost six times as likely to roll over. NHTSA issued unusual consumer advisories about the vans in 2001 and 2002, urging special training for anyone who operates one. The propensity of the vans to roll over has already led some groups who own them to keep them less than fully loaded.

"The real issue with the vans is that they are very badly designed," said Joan Claybrook, president of Public Citizen, a Washington-based consumer group. "These vans are more likely to roll over when fully loaded. It's really a fraud to sell them as 15-passenger vehicles."

The vans have also received the attention of the Senate Commerce Committee. Under legislation the committee approved in June, 15-passenger vans would have to meet all safety standards that cars do, and some of those standards would be considerably tougher. The bill would force automakers to overhaul van designs, Claybrook said.

Almost 300 people died between 1991 and 2000 in accidents involving 15-passenger models, NTSB project manager Jennifer Bishop said. And the NTSB estimates there are more than 500,000 vans on the road today.


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