Lessons Learned from a Motorcoach Tragedy

NTSB Calls for Fire Prevention Upgrades on Motorcoaches

Its investigation into a bus accident that killed 23 elderly people fleeing Hurricane Rita has prompted the National Transportation Safety Board to issue a series of far-reaching recommendations to federal highway regulators to improve motorcoach safety.

The accident occurred on September 23, 2005. A 1998 Motor Coach Industries, Inc., 54-passenger motorcoach, operated by Global Limo Inc., of Pharr, Texas, was traveling northbound on Interstate 45 near Wilmer, Texas. The motorcoach, en route from Bellaire to Dallas, Texas, as part of the evacuation in anticipation of Hurricane Rita, was carrying 44 assisted living facility residents and nursing staff. A passing motorist alerted the driver that the right-rear tire hub was glowing red. The driver and nursing staff exited the motorcoach and saw flames coming from the right-rear wheel well. As they initiated an evacuation, with assistance from passersby, heavy smoke and fire quickly engulfed the entire vehicle. Twenty-three of the 44 passengers died, two were seriously injured, and 19 received minor injuries. The driver also received minor injuries.

As a result of its investigation, the Safety Board is urging the Federal Motor Carrier Safety Administration (FMCSA) to gather and evaluate information on the causes, frequency, and severity of bus and motorcoach fires; conduct ongoing analysis of fire data to measure the effectiveness of fire prevention and mitigation techniques; and prohibit commercial vehicles from operating with wheel seal or other hub lubrication leaks.

Until completion of the Comprehensive Safety Analysis 2010 Initiative, the NTSB also wants the FMCSA to immediately issue an interim rule to include all FMCSA regulations in the current compliance review process so that they are reflected in the calculation of a carrier’s final rating.

The NTSB is also urging the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration (NHTSA) to develop detection systems to monitor the temperature of wheel well compartments to provide early warning of malfunctions that could lead to fires. Standards for better fire protection of motorcoach fuel systems and fire-hardening of exterior fire-prone materials, such as those in areas around wheel wells, will limit the potential for flame spread into the passenger compartment.

In addition, the Safety Board wants NHTSA to evaluate emergency evacuation designs of motorcoaches and buses by conducting simulation studies and evacuation drills, taking into account acceptable egress times for postaccident environments, including fire and smoke; unavailable exit situations; and the current above-ground height and design of window exits to be used in emergencies by all potential vehicle occupants.

The accident report and recommendations are available at www.ntsb.gov.