



National Transportation Safety Board

Washington, D.C. 20594

Safety Recommendation

Date: August 4, 2003

In reply refer to: H-03-19

48 Governors and Mayor of the District of Columbia
(List attached.)

The National Transportation Safety Board is an independent Federal agency charged by Congress with investigating transportation accidents, determining their probable cause, and making recommendations to prevent similar accidents from occurring. We are providing the following information to urge your State and the District of Columbia to take action on the safety recommendation in this letter. The Safety Board is vitally interested in this recommendation because it is designed to prevent accidents and save lives.

This recommendation addresses the need for 12- and 15-passenger van driver license endorsement. The recommendation is derived from the Safety Board's investigation of the May 8, 2001, rollover of a 1993 Dodge 15-passenger van on U.S. Route 82 near Henrietta, Texas, and the July 1, 2001, overturn of a 1989 Dodge Ram 15-passenger van on U.S. Route 220 near Randleman, North Carolina,¹ and is consistent with the evidence we found and the analysis we performed. As a result of this investigation, the Safety Board has issued 16 safety recommendations, 1 of which is addressed to the States and the District of Columbia. Information supporting the recommendation is discussed below. The Safety Board would appreciate a response from you within 90 days addressing the actions you have taken or intend to take to implement our recommendation.

On May 8, 2001, about 8:57 a.m., central daylight time, a 1993 Dodge 15-passenger van was eastbound on U.S. Route 82 near Henrietta, Texas, en route from Burkburnett, Texas, to an outlet mall in Gainesville, Texas. The driver and 11 passengers, all members of the First Assembly of God Church, occupied the van. As the vehicle approached milepost 538 in the left lane, at a calculated speed of 61 to 67 mph, the left rear tire experienced a tread separation and blowout; subsequently, the van departed the roadway and rolled over at least two times in the median, ejecting seven passengers before coming to final rest. The driver and three of the ejected passengers sustained fatal injuries, and eight passengers sustained serious injuries.

On July 1, 2001, about 2:30 p.m., eastern daylight time, a 1989 Dodge Ram 15-passenger van was northbound in the left lane on U.S. Route 220, near Randleman, North Carolina, en route from Myrtle Beach, South Carolina, to Roanoke, Virginia. The van, owned by Virginia

¹ For additional information, read National Transportation Safety Board, *Dodge 15-Passenger Van Rollover on U.S. Route 82 Near Henrietta, Texas, on May 8, 2001, and Dodge 15-Passenger Van Overturn on U.S. Route 220 Near Randleman, North Carolina, on July 1, 2001*, Highway Accident Report NTSB/HAR-03/03 (Washington, DC: NTSB, 2003).

Heights Baptist Church of Roanoke, Virginia, was occupied by the driver and 13 passengers, ages 13 to 19. As the vehicle approached the Level Cross, North Carolina, exit, at a witness-estimated speed of 65 mph, the left rear tire experienced a tread separation and blowout; subsequently, the van moved from the left lane into the right lane, then back into the left lane, where it overturned and came to rest in the travel lanes. During the accident sequence, four passengers were ejected, one of whom was fatally injured and three of whom sustained serious injuries; the driver and the other nine passengers sustained injuries ranging from none to serious.

The National Transportation Safety Board determined that the probable cause of the accidents was tire failure, the drivers' response to that failure, and the drivers' inability to maintain control of their vans. Contributing to the accidents was the deteriorated condition of the tires, as a result of the churches' lack of tire maintenance, and the handling characteristics of the vans. Contributing to the severity of the injuries was the lack of appropriate *Federal Motor Vehicle Safety Standards* applicable to 15-passenger vans in the areas of restraints and occupant protection.

The National Highway Traffic Safety Administration's (NHTSA's) study on *The Rollover Propensity of Fifteen-Passenger Vans* demonstrated that 15-passenger vans are inherently unstable when loaded to the level for which they are designed—carrying more than 10 passengers. NHTSA therefore advises all van drivers to obtain specific training on the handling and operation of these vehicles. However, as investigators found during the Henrietta and Randleman accident investigations, the van owners were not aware of the information provided by NHTSA in its consumer advisory. The advisory has not reached all 15-passenger van operators, even those within the target group, such as churches, and the Henrietta and Randleman operators did not know that they should have specific training to operate the vans safely. Both accident drivers had experience operating 15-passenger vans, but no specialized training on the handling and driving characteristics of these vehicles; neither driver was able to control the van in an emergency.

As shown in testing by Standards Testing Laboratories, Inc., and Safety Board staff, the van was controllable during an anticipated blowout, and the test driver thought that the effort required to control the vehicle was within the range of an unimpaired driver. The professional test driver also stated that the van was more difficult to control at higher speeds, particularly with lower tire inflation pressures, and that steering inputs were magnified after the blowout. The test driver had experience operating 15-passenger vans during a blowout, and he triggered the tire blowout himself, so the situation was not unexpected, as it was during the accidents.

While both accident drivers were familiar with their respective vans and had driven them previously, investigators did not find evidence that either driver had experienced an emergency situation, such as tire failure, while operating the van. Both drivers are likely to have overcorrected and braked following the blowout because they did not know how to respond appropriately to the vehicle dynamics that occurred after the blowout and did not understand the potential instability problems associated with 15-passenger vans. The drivers are likely to have reacted instinctively by attempting to correct the rotation of the van while braking to slow it. Had the two drivers maintained their speed, not applied the brakes, and exerted more controlled steering, as the professional driver did during the tests, they may have been able to control their vans. Braking, the likely response on the part of both drivers, can lead to further vehicle

instability during a tire failure, particularly in a fully loaded 15-passenger van with a high, rearward center of gravity. The drivers' lack of training on their vehicles' operating and handling characteristics, particularly in emergency situations, put them at a disadvantage in reacting to the blowout.

As the National Safety Council, the American Automobile Association, and most driver education programs recognize, acceleration is the appropriate response to a blowout, but that response is counterintuitive to the general public. Therefore, such groups emphasize that drivers need to refrain from braking and to decelerate slowly in the event of a tire blowout. This strategy requires that the driver provide steering input to counteract the lateral dragging force created by the blown tire. If a driver brakes, the lateral steering force experienced by the vehicle is greater and the driver must provide more steering input to maintain control of the vehicle. If the driver provides too much steering input, he or she will have to try to correct the direction of the vehicle and may oversteer. When the vehicle has a high, rearward center of gravity, as a loaded 15-passenger van does, the rapid changes in steering direction can lead to instability and rollover. A similar driver reaction to a blowout in a passenger car is unlikely to have such severe consequences because the passenger car's lower center of gravity makes it more forgiving of inappropriate driver inputs.

Impressing upon 15-passenger van drivers the inherent dangers of operating these vehicles, particularly when fully loaded, and educating them about proper handling and control, particularly during emergency situations, can reduce the risk of rollover. Such training can also help dispel the expectation that these vans operate like large passenger cars. While the accident drivers had experience operating the vans, they did not have experience with how the vehicles would respond in this type of emergency situation or other emergency situations or the consequences of their instinctive reactions to such situations. Educating drivers on how such vehicles respond to, and on the consequences of, different driver input could help operators approach 15-passenger van driving more cautiously.

In addition, training would provide a forum for educating drivers about the tire pressures and maintenance required for 15-passenger vans. The rear tires on a fully loaded van, for instance, must be inflated to 80 pounds per square inch, which is much higher than the rear tire pressure for most passenger cars. Stressing the importance of proper tire inflation during training will help drivers avoid potential problems. Drivers should also be taught to check the tires and tire pressure before driving the vehicle. In both these accidents, the tires were in very poor condition, which should have been readily apparent to someone who knew to look for cracks and rotting rubber.

To ensure that drivers have the necessary skills to operate vehicles other than passenger vehicles, States have established classes of driver's licenses, for example, a commercial driver's license, a motorcycle license, or a chauffeur's endorsement, that require specialized training and testing. No such class of license exists for 15-passenger vans. Yet, as NHTSA has acknowledged, 15-passenger van operators need training in the handling of those vehicles, and testing has demonstrated that controlling 15-passenger vans in a blowout is possible for a trained driver. The Safety Board concludes that safe operation of 15-passenger vans requires a knowledge and skill level different from and above that for passenger vehicles, particularly when the vans are fully loaded or drivers experience an emergency situation. The Safety Board has

recommended that the American Driver and Traffic Safety Education Association, in cooperation with NHTSA, the National Safety Council, the American Automobile Association, Ford Motor Company, and General Motors Corporation, develop a training program for 12- and 15-passenger van drivers.

Therefore, the National Transportation Safety Board recommends that the States and the District of Columbia:

Establish a driver's license endorsement for 12- and 15-passenger vans that adopts the standards established by the American Driver and Traffic Safety Education Association; to obtain the endorsement, drivers should have to complete a training program on the operation of 12- and 15-passenger vans and pass a written and skills test. (H-03-19)

The Safety Board also issued safety recommendations to the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration, the Federal Motor Carrier Safety Administration, the American Driver and Traffic Safety Education Association, the American Automobile Association, the National Safety Council, the American Association of Motor Vehicle Administrators, Ford Motor Company, and General Motors Corporation. In your response to this letter, please refer to Safety Recommendation H-03-19. If you need additional information, you may call (202) 314-6177.

Chairman ENGLEMAN, Vice Chairman ROSENKER, and Members GOGLIA, CARMODY, and HEALING concurred in this recommendation.

Original Signed

By: Ellen G. Engleman
Chairman

Honorable Robert Riley
Governor
State of Alabama
State Capitol
600 Dexter Avenue
Montgomery, Alabama 36130-2751

Honorable Frank Murkowski
Governor
State of Alaska
State Capitol
Post Office Box 110001
Juneau, Alaska 99811-0001

Honorable Mike Huckabee
Governor
State of Arkansas
State Capitol, Room 250
Little Rock, Arkansas 72201

Honorable Janet Napolitano
Governor
State of Arizona
State Capitol
1700 West Washington
Phoenix, Arizona 85007

Honorable Bill Owens
Governor
State of Colorado
State Capitol
136 State Capitol
Denver, Colorado 80203-1792

Honorable John Rowland
Governor
State of Connecticut
State Capitol
210 Capitol Avenue
Hartford, Connecticut 06106

Honorable Ruth Ann Minner
Governor
State of Delaware
State Capitol
Tatnall Building
William Penn Street
Dover, Delaware 19901

Honorable Sonny Perdue
Governor
State of Georgia
State Capitol
203 State Capitol
Atlanta, Georgia 30334

Honorable Linda Lingle
Governor
State of Hawaii
State Capitol
Executive Chambers
Honolulu, Hawaii 96813

Honorable Kirk Kempthorne
Governor
State of Idaho
State Capitol
700 West Jefferson, Second Floor
Boise, Idaho 83702

Honorable Rod Blagojevich
Governor
State of Illinois
State Capitol
207 Statehouse
Springfield, Illinois 62706

Honorable Frank O'Bannon
Governor
State of Indiana
State Capitol
206 State House
Indianapolis, Indiana 46204

Honorable Gray Davis
Governor
State of California
State Capitol
Sacramento, California 95814

Honorable Jeb Bush
Governor
State of Florida
The Capitol
Tallahassee, Florida 32399-0001

Honorable Thomas Vilsack
Governor
State of Iowa
State Capitol
Des Moines, Iowa 50319-0001

Honorable Robert Ehrlich
Governor
State of Maryland
State House
100 State Circle
Annapolis, Maryland 21401

Honorable Mitt Romney
Governor
Commonwealth of Massachusetts
State House, Room 360
Boston, Massachusetts 02133

Honorable Jennifer Granholm
Governor
State of Michigan
State Capitol
Post Office Box 30013
Lansing, Michigan 48909

Honorable Tim Pawlenty
Governor
State of Minnesota
State Capitol
130 State Capitol
75 Constitution Avenue
St. Paul, Minnesota 55155

Honorable Judy Martz
Governor
State of Montana
State Capitol
Post Office Box 0801
Helena, Montana 59620

Honorable Mike Johanns
Governor
State of Nebraska
State Capitol
Post Office Box 94848
Lincoln, Nebraska 68506-4848

Honorable George Pataki
Governor
State of New York
State Capitol
Albany, New York 12224

Honorable Brad Henry
Governor
State of Oklahoma
State Capitol, Suite 212
Oklahoma City, Oklahoma 73105

Honorable Ted Kulongoski
Governor
State of Oregon
State Capitol
900 Court Street NE, Room 160
Salem, Oregon 97301-4047

Honorable Edward Rendell
Governor
Commonwealth of Pennsylvania
State Capitol, Room 225
Harrisburg, Pennsylvania 17120

Honorable Phil Bredesen
Governor
State of Tennessee
State Capitol
Nashville, Tennessee 37243-0001

Honorable Kathleen Sebelius
Governor
State of Kansas
State Capitol
Topeka, Kansas 66612-1590

Honorable Paul Patton
Governor
Commonwealth of Kentucky
State Capitol
700 Capitol Avenue
Frankfort, Kentucky 40601

Honorable Mike Foster
Governor
State of Louisiana
State Capitol
Post Office Box 94004
Baton Rouge, Louisiana 70804-9004

Honorable James McGreevey
Governor
State of New Jersey
State Capitol
125 West State Street
Trenton, New Jersey 08625

Honorable Ronnie Musgrove
Governor
State of Mississippi
State Capitol
Post Office Box 139
Jackson, Mississippi 39205

Honorable Bob Holden
Governor
State of Missouri
State Capitol
Room 216
Jefferson City, Missouri 65101

Honorable Don Carcieri
Governor
State of Rhode Island
State House
Providence, Rhode Island 02903-1196

Honorable Kenny Guinn
Governor
State of Nevada
State Capitol
101 North Carson Street
Carson City, Nevada 89701

Honorable Craig Benson
Governor
State of New Hampshire
State House, Room 208
107 North Maine Street
Concord, New Hampshire 03301

Honorable Bill Richardson
Governor
State of New Mexico
State Capitol, Fourth Floor
Santa Fe, New Mexico 87300

Honorable Michael Easley
Governor
State of North Carolina
State Capitol
20301 Mail Service Center
Raleigh, North Carolina 27699-0301

Honorable John Hoeven
Governor
State of North Dakota
State Capitol
600 East Boulevard Avenue
Bismarck, North Dakota 58505-0001

Honorable Bob Taft
Governor
State of Ohio
State Capitol
77 South High Street, 30th Floor
Columbus, Ohio 43215-6117

Honorable Mark Sanford
Governor
State of South Carolina
State Capitol
Post Office Box 12267
Columbia, South Carolina 29211

Honorable Jim Doyle
Governor
State of Wisconsin
State Capitol
115 East
Madison, Wisconsin 53702

Honorable Mike Rounds
Governor
State of South Dakota
State Capitol
500 East Capitol Avenue
Pierre, South Dakota 57501

Honorable Dave Freudenthal
Governor
State of Wyoming
State Capitol, Room 124
Cheyenne, Wyoming 82002

Honorable Michael Leavitt
Governor
State of Utah
State Capitol
210 State Capitol
Salt Lake City, Utah 84114

Honorable John E. Baldacci
Governor
State of Maine
State Capitol
1 State House Station
Augusta, Maine 04333

Honorable James H. Douglas
Governor
State of Vermont
State Capitol
109 State Street
Montpelier, Vermont 05609

Honorable Anthony A. Williams
Mayor
District of Columbia
John A. Wilson Building
1350 Pennsylvania Avenue, NW
Washington, DC 20004

Honorable Gary Locke
Governor
State of Washington
State Capitol
Post Office Box 40002
Olympia, Washington 98504-0002

Honorable Bob Wise
Governor
State of West Virginia
State Capitol
Charleston, West Virginia 25305-0370