

Adopted: 7/17/90

Log# H-552A



National Transportation Safety Board

Washington, D.C. 20594

Safety Recommendation

Date: August 22, 1990

In reply refer to: H-90-79 through -80

Colonel Joe Milner, Director
Texas Department of Public Safety
P.O. Box 4087
Austin, TX 78773-0001

About 7:34 a.m., central daylight time, on Thursday, September 21, 1989, a westbound school bus with 81 students operated by the Mission Consolidated Independent School District, Mission, Texas, and a northbound delivery truck operated by the Valley Coca-Cola Bottling Company, McAllen, Texas, collided at Bryan Road and Farm-to-Market Road Number 676 (FM 676) in Alton, Texas. Nineteen students died at the accident scene, and two died later in the hospital. The 21 fatalities were the result of drowning or complications related to the submersion. Furthermore, 3 students sustained serious injuries, 46 others sustained minor injuries, and 11 students were not injured.¹

The City of Alton had a five member police department, comprised of an acting chief (a lieutenant), a sergeant, and three officers. Officers received basic law enforcement training through the Hidalgo County Sheriff's Academy. The lieutenant stated that the Alton police department did not have written guidelines or policies regarding police operations. He indicated that they operate by the chain of command and standard operating procedures. If they have a major incident, the Hidalgo County Sheriff's office would be contacted to provide appropriate assistance.

As the various police and rescue units arrived on the scene, they initially functioned independently of each other in a reasonably efficient

¹For more detailed information, read Highway Accident Report--"Collision between Mission Consolidated Independent School District School Bus and Valley Coca-Cola Bottling Company, Inc., Tractor-Semitrailer, Intersection of Bryan Road and Texas Farm-to-Market Road Number 676, in Alton, Texas, September 21, 1989" (NTSB/HAR-90/02).

manner, rather than in a typical on-scene incident command situation.² The initial lack of coordination between police and rescue units may have contributed to early problems with crowd and traffic control.

First, Alton does not have an office of emergency planning; however, Hidalgo County has an Office of Emergency Management, staffed by the county coordinator and a secretary. The coordinator had served in this position since 1985. He primarily served as the superintendent of buildings and grounds and collaterally as the emergency management coordinator. The coordinator provided the Safety Board with a copy of an "Emergency Operations Plan" developed in 1975. The Safety Board also obtained a copy of the 1985 "Emergency Operations Plan" developed in accordance with the Texas Department of Public Safety Division of Emergency Management (DPSDEM) and Federal Emergency Management Agency requirements. Although the latter plan indicates that it was approved by the Hidalgo County Commissioners' Court on August 12, 1985, it had never been submitted to the court or to the Texas DPSDEM in accordance with State requirements.

Second, Alton does not have an emergency operations plan as required by the State of Texas Disaster Act of 1975. Additionally, it does not have a specific emergency operations plan dealing with mass casualties. The State of Texas DPSDEM has apparently not given smaller localities a high priority in seeing that they establish emergency operation plans required by the Texas Disaster Act of 1975. The Texas DPSDEM also does not have a specific emergency operation plan dealing with mass casualty accidents. The Safety Board believes that the Texas DPSDEM should ensure that all localities and counties are in compliance with the Texas Disaster Act of 1975. If not, the Texas DPSDEM should provide assistance in the preparation or update of appropriate plans. Also the State of Texas DPSDEM should develop a statewide plan to provide assistance for mass casualties.

Therefore, the National Transportation Safety Board recommends that the Texas Department of Public Safety:

Examine the status of emergency management response plans statewide and work in coordination with and provide guidance to county and local governments in complying with the Department of Public Safety Division of Emergency Management emergency response plans requirements. (Class II, Priority Action) (H-90-79)

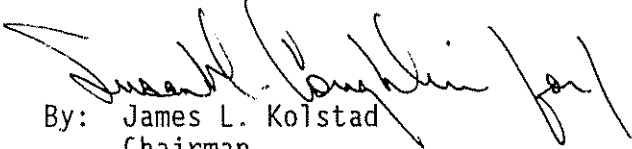
Evaluate in cooperation with Hidalgo County its compliance with the Texas Disaster Act of 1975. (Class II, Priority Action) (H-90-80)

²In this system the incident commander divides duties into distinct, manageable activities and designates the management of those activities to a qualified officer or other person. The incident commander then obtains needed information and directs actions to be implemented through his appointed personnel.

Also, the Safety Board issued Safety Recommendations H-90-74 through -78 and reiterated H-89-5 to the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration; H-90-81 to the Texas Education Agency; H-90-82 through -83 to the Hidalgo County; H-90-84 through -85 to the City of Alton; H-90-86 to the Mission Consolidated Independent School District; H-90-87 to the Coca-Cola Enterprises, Inc.; H-90-88 through -89 to the Valley Coca-Cola Bottling Co., Inc.; and H-90-90 to the National Association of State Directors of Pupil Transportation Services.

The National Transportation Safety Board is an independent Federal agency with the statutory responsibility "to promote transportation safety by conducting independent accident investigations and by formulating safety improvement recommendations" (Public Law 93-633). The Safety Board is vitally interested in any action taken as a result of its safety recommendations. Therefore, it would appreciate a response from you regarding action taken or contemplated with respect to the recommendations in this letter. Please refer to Safety Recommendations H-90-79 through -80 in your reply.

KOLSTAD, Chairman, COUGHLIN, Vice Chairman, and LAUBER and BURNETT, Members, concurred in these recommendations.


By: James L. Kolstad
Chairman