

### **15 Passenger Vans - The Latest**

For decades now the use of 12-15 passenger vans for use with student transportation, whether K-12 or higher education, has been highly discouraged by all safety and risk management organizations. The National Highway Transportation Safety Association (NHTSA) which only has the power to regulate the manufacture and sale of motor vehicles has prohibited the purchase of these vehicles for use with student transportation. However, if an entity already has these vehicles then use is regulated by the state and local authorities.

**The issue:** Any vehicle used to transport 10 or more students is considered a bus and therefore is required to meet federal bus design criteria. The vans in question do not meet bus design standards for safety. Additionally, any vehicle transporting less than 15 students does not require the driver to carry a CDL license for school transportation. This created the proliferation of these vehicles being used for transporting students on field trips and athletic competitions because they are cheaper than a bus and any licensed driver can drive them. However, the real issue is the propensity for these vehicles to roll over at a higher rate than the average vehicle and much higher than a typical bus or mini-bus. This experience has prompted many insurers to not provide coverage.

Wright Specialty does provide coverage, but highly discourages their use and proposes the following actions to reduce risk to students, drivers, staff, and ultimately the school. The following includes recommendations from an NHTSA 2018 Advisory.

- Set up a plan to replace the vans with vehicles that meet federal standards or contract out transportation.
- Do not use the last rows and always fill the seats forward of the rear axle for better stability. This includes any gear too.
- Never load anything on top of the vehicle as it will further increase the van's instability.
- Drivers should be vetted by an experienced adult driver, be 21 years old or older, and have at least 3 years of driving experience. They should receive special driver training and obtain experience driving the vehicle before their first trip to get comfortable with the unique handling capabilities vans provide as part of a formal driver certification process.
- Driver certification should include a Motor Vehicle Records review with no driving violations in the last 3 years, a road test to ensure the individual is capable of driving the van safely, and a review of the factors that can lead to accidents including pre-tripping the van.
- Have a vetted backup driver on long trips.
- ALL occupants must ALWAYS wear a seatbelt.
- Tires must be inflated to the prescribed pressure and have sufficient tread for each trip. The incorrect pressure along with excessive tread wear are known aggravating factors for accidents.

The **good news** is that the 12-15 passenger van built today is better than those built 10 years ago. The latest innovations that positively affect the stability of these vehicles are the advent of Electronic Stability Control (ESC) and Tire Pressure Monitoring Systems (TPMS) which have been required in newer vehicles. The presence of these devices and the rollover issue awareness has greatly reduced the number of accidents and fatalities over recent years. So, with the above safety precautions coupled with the technological advances in the newer vehicles the risk is indeed lower than it has been.

For additional information click <https://www.saferidenews.com/2018/08/nhtsa-clarifies-15-passenger-van-regulations/> or contact Andrew Graham, Managing Director – Risk Management Services [agraham@wrightinsurance.com](mailto:agraham@wrightinsurance.com).