

15-Passenger Vans

The 15-passenger vans are inherently dangerous vehicles for passenger transport, due to several factors, including the fact they are designed for cargo, they do not have the safety features of other multiple-passenger vehicles like school buses, they become top heavy (especially when fully loaded), are difficult to maneuver and prone to rollovers.

The rollover probability of 15-passenger vans is linked to a high center of gravity, which tends to increase and shift to the rear as the van is loaded with persons and cargo. The shift to the rear decreases the lateral stability and makes the van prone to fishtailing. If this occurs, the high center of gravity may cause a tip and roll accident. Ideally, the church should eliminate the use of 15-passenger vans and use contracted transportation or purchase a small school-type bus. However, should the church need to use the 15-passenger vans, the National Highway Transportation Safety Administration (NHTSA) suggests the following points to lower your rollover risk:

- Screen and train all drivers.
- Remove the rear seat.
- Limit the capacity to 12 persons, including the driver.
- Always load forward seats first.
- Communicate with passengers and parents about the high risks.
- Do not tow anything behind the vehicle or load the roof.
- Conduct a full safety inspection of the vehicle, including tire pressure and wear.
- Include safety items such as a fire extinguisher, first-aid kit and cell phone/radio—do not use these items while driving.
- Require all passengers and the driver to wear proper safety restraints while the
- vehicle is moving.

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It is recommended that 15-passenger vans avoid maneuvers such as sharp turns, excessive speeds, and abrupt movement, and have properly inflated tires. Unfortunately, many rollover incidents are either due to under/overinflated tires and these unavoidable maneuvers.

As you are aware, 15-passenger vans are very popular for transportation of college teams, civic groups, church groups and hotel/airport shuttles. These vehicles are also popular because the operation of 15-passenger vans does not require a commercial driver’s license (CDL). Combine this with the fact that the driver is not a commercial driver, and they are operating a vehicle like that of a commercial vehicle. Drivers need specialized training to effectively handle these vans if they are to be utilized. Poorly trained or inexperienced drivers, environmental conditions and road conditions all play a large role in setting an accident scenario. The NHTSA notes three major situations that lead to a rollover: The van goes off a rural road and will likely overturn when striking a ditch or embankment. Rollover is also possible if the van is tripped by an object or runs into soft soil such as a shoulder. If the wheels drop off the roadway, the driver should know to gradually reduce speed and steer back to the road when safe.

A driver is tired or is driving too fast for road conditions. Tired drivers can doze off and lose control. A driver can also lose control when traveling at a high-speed causing the van to slide sideways off the road. The grassy or dirt medians which line highways often cause the van to overturn when tires dig into the dirt. Drivers must be well rested and cautiously drive on country and curvy roads.

The driver, in responding to an emergency, overcorrects the steering in a quick panic reaction and the wheels drive off the pavement. This can lead to a rollover or cause the van to slide sideways, especially at highway speeds. Only drivers with specific training on the use of driving 15-passenger vans should be allowed to drive them and should also receive refresher training on an annual basis.

You may be surprised to learn most 15-passenger van rollover crashes are single-vehicle accidents. The following are driver tips which should help to minimize the rollover risk:

Stay in control of the van. Avoid conditions which lead to loss of control, such as driving under the influence of alcohol or other drugs.

Get the necessary sleep you need to stay attentive during trips. Slow down if roads are wet or icy, or if it is foggy.

Drive with caution on curved or rural roads and maintain a safe speed to avoid running off the road. Wheels dropping off the side of the road create potential panic situations and an uneven surface elevation will make the van unstable.

In the event the van wheels drop off a roadway, the driver should gradually reduce speed and steer back onto the road when safe to proceed. Do not jerk the wheels back onto the roadway, especially at high speeds as sudden moves over 30 MPH are highly discouraged.

Inspect your tires and keep them properly maintained. Proper inflation and tread are essential for safe driving. Worn tires can also cause a van to slide to the side on slippery pavement. Under/ overinflated tires can cause handling problems and lead to tire failure. Check your pressure and tread-wear before every trip.

If you are transporting less than 15 passengers in the van, have them sit in the seats in front of the rear axle. Do not allow more than 15 passengers (including the driver), within the vehicle.

For every 150 pounds of cargo, reduce your occupant load by one passenger.

Do not use the roof for transporting cargo and remove the roof racks if possible.

As a driver, do not operate or answer a cell phone or two-way radio while the vehicle is in motion. If calls on cell phones or radios are necessary, pull over and stop the vehicle before using this equipment.

Pay attention; a simple task can present a collision scenario such as:

- Changing radio stations frequently or handling CDs, tapes or DVDs.
- Avoid distractions from the van occupants and remind them prior to the trip of this request.
- Avoid searching for items that are not directly reachable such as drinks and dropped items; have a van occupant retrieve the item(s) if necessary, or simply pull over if an item is not within reach.
- Do not read a map while driving; either pull over or establish a navigator. Proper directions should be supplied prior to departure and stay away from routes that have sharp turns and high speeds, uneven and poor road conditions, as well as high traffic volume.

Conclusion

As noted previously, there are no regulations for the use of vans and buses for church organizations. Your church should consider all these safety issues before choosing and using 15-passenger vans to transport people. School buses are among the safest passenger vehicle on the road; your church should consider contracting a transportation service or removing your 15-passenger vans from service and purchase small school buses.