

FIFTEEN-PASSENGER VANS

Managing Hospitality Risk



WHAT'S AT RISK?

Fifteen-passenger vans are in widespread use as hotel shuttles. They are a convenient size for the needs of busy hotels and can typically be operated without a commercial drivers license. There have been a number of widely-publicized single-vehicle crashes that have involved fifteen-passenger vans. All but one of these crashes have involved rollover. These vans differ from most light truck-type vehicles in that they have a large payload capacity and the occupants sit fairly high up in the vehicle. When loaded, the vehicle may have a much higher rollover potential than when unloaded. The shift in the center of gravity additionally increases the potential for loss of control in panic maneuvers.

The propensity to roll over increases with the occupancy level. A fully loaded fifteen-passenger van runs almost six times the risk of rolling over as compared to the same van with fewer than five occupants. In tests, the effects of occupant loading were greater for the fifteen-passenger van than for the seven passenger van or the minivan.

WHAT ARE YOUR LEGAL OBLIGATIONS?

There are no laws prohibiting the use of fifteen-passenger vans, and many hotels have operated them for years without incident. But the risk factors are higher than other modes of transportation, particularly if the operator is unaware of the potential hazards. Ultimately, the hotel will be held responsible for the safe arrival of the guests they transport.

The prudent hotel operator will control the risk as thoroughly as possible by establishing minimum requirements for drivers of vans, uniform training and certification of all drivers of vans and specific load distribution training and policies. It is strongly recommended by the NHTSA that drivers attend the American Automobile Association (AAA) driver improvement program (or similar program) prior to operation. Drivers should understand and be familiar with the handling characteristics of these vans, especially when fully loaded. Wearing safety belts dramatically increases the chances of survival during a rollover. Individuals riding as passengers in these vans, as well as drivers, are required to wear safety belts at all times.

HOW CAN YOU BETTER PROTECT YOUR ORGANIZATION?

For some suggestions designed to assist you in developing sound policies and procedures for your organization, please turn this document over and review the attached checklist.

For more information about this and other hospitality risk management topics, please contact:

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Checklist: Fifteen Passenger Vans

- Develop a written standard clearly defining who is eligible to drive. This should include minimum driver qualifications such as age, experience level and acceptable driving record. These criteria must be fairly and consistently followed.
- Create a system to verify that all drivers meet these qualifications at the time of hire and periodically during the course of employment.
- Establish clear rules and policies for the use and maintenance of company vehicles or vehicles used on company business.
- Institute clear accountabilities and consequences for failure to comply with these rules and policies.
- Verify that all persons driving company vehicles possess a valid driver's license for the type of vehicle being driven.
- Order a motor vehicle record (MVR) for all persons driving company vehicles. This is a record provided by the state of license for all recent traffic violations, suspensions or cancellations. This is the only way of knowing if a driver's license is currently valid and also if the driver has a history of violations. Verify that drivers do not possess multiple licenses from various states.
- Review driving records at least annually. Establish a company policy regarding drivers with unacceptable driving records.
- Verify past driving employment references on all persons hired to drive.
- Drivers hired to operate vehicles carrying guests of your hotel should be 21 or older.
- Depending on the type of vehicle driven, a Commercial Driver's License (CDL) may be required. If so, get a copy on record and set a diary to make sure it is renewed at expiration.
- If possible within the employment framework of your facility, a Drug and Alcohol Screening program should be used with drivers.
- Orientation and refresher training should be provided for all van drivers. Managers should never assume that "anyone can drive a van." Supervisors or lead drivers should provide in-the-field instruction. Completion of training courses such as the AAA or National Safety Council's series on safe van operation should be encouraged.
- Drivers need to be specifically instructed on key risk factors like overloading the van, travel at unsafe speeds, the dangers during cornering and following too closely.
- Vans should be marked with contact information for motorist comments on driving performance. Likewise, passenger complaints should always be taken seriously, logged, and discussed with the driver in question.
- A routine, documented vehicle inspection should be conducted every day before vans are put in service.
- Cell phone use by the driver, and other potentially distracting behaviors, should be forbidden during operation. Drivers need their full attention on the road.
- If you have questions concerning the crash characteristics of fifteen-passenger vehicles, contact NHTSA. Call the auto safety hotline at 1-888-327-4236 or go to the NHTSA website for a copy of the NHTSA analysis of rollover characteristics of fifteen passenger vans.