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# 15 Passenger Van Study

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Department of  
Administrative Services –  
Office of Fleet  
Management

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15 Passenger Van Committee

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## **Executive Summary**

Multiple federal studies indicate that 15-passenger vans are more susceptible to rollover and less likely to protect vehicle occupants during a crash than other vehicles. In 1999, the National Transportation Safety Board (NTSB) reported a disturbing trend in student transportation by educational institutions. NTSB's concern was the increasing use of "non-conforming buses" including 15-passenger vans to transport students. The National Highway Transportation Safety Administration (NHTSA) issued five safety alerts from 2002 through 2009.

There is presently a federal ban in place on the use of 15-passenger vans to transport pre-school through high school students. Safety enhancements were mandated on GM, Ford and Dodge vans by 2004. The State of Georgia's Fleet has well over 1000 vans that predate the implementation of those safety measures.

While the State of Georgia's Fleet has no special 15-passenger van use limitations, many agencies have policies in place to improve van safety. All agencies should consider adopting standard policies with more stringent limitations which range from additional driver safety training and discontinuing the use of pre-2004 15-passenger vans.

The missions and activities of state agencies are extremely varied and often, one policy does not meet the needs of each individual agency. We transport the elderly and the afflicted, inmates, co-workers, students, athletic teams and many other groups, in state vehicles and rentals. It is the hope of this committee, that we focus on the driver and the driver's training.

## **15-Passenger Definition:**

Any van having a total occupancy of 15 people (including the driver). Any vehicle larger than that requires a CDL license.

## **Van Risks:**

- The Ford design was to lengthen the body over the same frame as smaller vehicles. GM increased the wheelbase. Safety experts feel the GM approach is the safer design.
- 15-passenger vans have a high rollover rate similar to light trucks and other vans when carrying less than 5 occupants, but the rate triples as the number of occupants increases to over 9 (Garret et al, 2001).
- Improperly loading or overloading causes the center of gravity to shift rearward and upward increasing the likelihood of “fishtailing” (sliding to the side) and rollover.
- Placing any load on the roof raises the center of gravity even higher and further increases the risk of rollover.
- Seat belt use significantly increases survival rates. In the study noted above 91% of all passengers that died from 15-passenger van rollover accidents were not wearing a safety belt. 80% of belted passengers survived.
- Vans roll at speeds as low as 35mph and the risk doubles above 50mph (Subramarine, 2004).
- Studies indicate that worn tires and improperly inflated tires often contribute to rollover accidents.

## **Georgia’s History:**

Just over a decade ago, a university van rolled over at high speeds, killing three and severely injuring ten students. As recently as Sept of 2011, a 15-passenger van rollover accident was reported to our claims intake unit.

## **Federal Regulations:**

- Tire Pressure Monitoring Systems (TPMS) are required in all 15-passenger vans as of 2008. They warn the driver if the tire is more than 25% under-inflated.
- Door lock enhancements were mandated on vans as of 2010.
- Electronic stability controls are mandated by 2012, but Ford and GM have had them as standard equipment since 2005.
- In 2003, the Federal Motor Carrier Safety Association (FMCSA) amended their regulations requiring those using 9 to 15 passenger vehicles for interstate commercial purposes to comply with FMCSA safety rules. The rules limit the time a driver is allowed to drive such a vehicle and place a responsibility on the driver for a safety inspection prior to operation including
  1. reviewing the most recent inspection report,
  2. inspecting parking brakes, steering, lights, horn wipers, tires, wheels, mirrors and emergency equipment,
  3. inspection reports must be signed by the driver.

*These requirements do not apply to our Fleet, but could be adopted as part of your safety program.*

## Agency Rental Requirements

We have recently surveyed all Fleet Managers concerning their co-workers use of and need for 15-passengers rental vehicles. Only 13 of 160 responded that they needed to rent this type of vehicle. While our regular van drivers receive extensive training at most agencies, renting often places an untrained driver in an unfamiliar vehicle, going to an unfamiliar area. Additionally, employees that occasionally rent vehicles may not be subject to the same scrutiny an agency employs when examine driving records.

**For these reasons, 15-passenger vans will be removed from the rental car approved list with our vendor. Should a situation arise where this type of vehicle is required, we suggest it be approved in writing by the agency Risk Manager. Since the statewide rental contract coverage will not be involved, we strongly recommend that, in those cases, additional coverage is purchased addressing any loss to the rented unit. Liability coverage will still be provided according to the terms of the Georgia Tort Claims Policy. While this change will be effective as of January 1, 2012, we ask all agencies to comply immediately, if possible.**

## Vehicle Acquisition

- 15-passenger vans will remain on our approved purchase list for several reasons.
- First, safety enhancements have reduced the risk.
- Secondly, some agencies run 15 passenger vans that are consistently full. The only reasonable alternative in those cases would be “cutaway” (a small bus built on a truck chassis) at considerably greater purchase and operating costs.
- It is **strongly** recommended that the agency properly assess its needs based on normal occupancy studies. If a minivan or a 12-passenger van will meet the majority of your requirements, please consider those alternatives.
- Should you decide on purchasing a 15 passenger van, we urge that you investigate the wheelbase, remembering that the longer the wheelbase, the lower the chance of rollovers.

## Pre-2005 15-Passenger Vans Presently In The Fleet

Due to the present economic state, neither individual agencies, nor the State as a whole, have the funding to replace all of these vehicles. However, here are some steps to lower the risk of losses.

- Always surplus the worst 15-passenger van when acquiring a new vehicle of any type.
- Remove all roof racks from vans in your fleet.
- Remove the rear seat.
- Remove any towing attachments.
- Cargo stacking should be limited to below the window height.
- Consider after-market enhancements aimed at eliminating rollover accidents.
- Load according to the attached material. <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5LrsZPQL-rG>
- Do not overload the vehicle with passengers and/or equipment.
- Develop a plan to regularly check the tire inflation and wear.
- Check and demand the use of seat belts.
- **Train Drivers.**

## Driver Training

The training and selection of drivers for 15-passenger vans are the key elements to reducing the associated risks. Many agencies have excellent training programs in this area. **This committee has adopted the Georgia Department of Corrections training guidelines as our model.** That document (attached), in conjunction with the Driver Qualification component of the Comprehensive Loss Control Program (CLCP), provides clear guidance in this area.

Please consider the following when setting up your agency's program;

- A combination of classroom and in-vehicle training is recommended.
- Several courses are available and there is a statewide contract with Smith Systems in place.
- Training modules are available through the Report My Driving Program for all state employees.
- Our Maintenance Management vendor, ARI, provides a free safety reminder program to all enrolled agencies.
- Check driving records frequently and let only those with clean records operate these vehicles.
- Utilize the Report My Driving Program to identify high risk behavior and train to that issue.
- Yearly agency driver certification training is recommended.

## Additional Recommendations

- We **strongly** suggest that all 15-passenger vans within the State's Fleet carry Auto Physical Damage Coverage. This will assist the agency in funding the replacement of older vans that have been involved in accidents.
- We **strongly** encourage all agencies to surplus newer vans and Cutaways that they are not fully utilizing. This will allow other agencies to dispose of the worst and oldest vans in their fleet.

**Committee Members:**

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Special thanks to Jim Sever (DOAS) for his technical assistance

<b>GEORGIA DEPARTMENT OF CORRECTIONS</b> Standard Operating Procedures		
<b>Functional Area:</b> SUPPORT SERVICES/FLEET MANAGEMENT	<b>Reference Number:</b> IVE01-0010	<b>Revises            Previous            Effective Date:</b>
<b>Subject:</b> OPERATION OF 15-PASSENGER VAN	[REDACTED]	4/01/03
<b>Authority:</b> OWENS/SMITH	<b>Effective Date:</b> 9/15/2010	Page 10 of 4

**I. POLICY:**

GDC employees will operate all 15-Passenger Vans in a safe manner. To achieve this policy, GDC employees that transport inmates or probationers in this type vehicle will be trained in the techniques of safe vehicle operations.

**II. APPLICABILITY:**

Applicable to All Georgia Department of Corrections

**III. RELATED DIRECTIVES:**

- A. DOAS Risk Management - Insurance Services "Auto Liability Coverage" and "Driving Do's and Don'ts" Training Video.  
<http://doas.ga.gov/StateLocal/Risk/Pages/RiskInsurance.aspx> (Also available on GDC CAPTIVA website at: Fleet Applications, Fleet Documents and Videos, Videos)
- B. SOP's IVE01-0003, IVE01-0004, IVE01-0006, IVE01-0009.

**IV. DEFINITIONS:**

NONE

**V. ATTACHMENTS:**

Attachment 1 - 15 Passenger Van Safety

(Also available on GDC CAPTIVA website at: Fleet Applications, Fleet Documents and Videos, Documents)

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**VI. PROCEDURE:**

- A. GDC will provide training to all employees whose duties may require them to transport inmates or probationers in 15-passenger vans. The GDC Training Section will provide training as requested. The content of the training will be consistent with guidelines promulgated by the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration and other qualified sources.
- B. Posting successful completion of the training will occur in each employee's permanent file. Each employee that completes the training will receive a Certificate of Completion.
- C. In addition to employee training, GDC has adopted the following precautions regarding the safe operation and transport of inmates and probationers in 15-passenger vans:
  1. Except in the case of an emergency, the maximum allowable speed of the 15-Passenger van is 60 MPH. The posting of a decal on each vehicle dashboard will serve as a reminder to all drivers. Placement of the decal shall be in a location where it is visible by the driver and passenger riding in the front of the vehicle. Drivers shall drive below the posted speed limit as an additional precaution, particularly when taking curves.

2. During highway travel, vans shall travel in the right hand lane; and multiple lane highways, in the right two lanes; preferably, the farthest right lane. Prior to changing lanes, the driver shall check their blind spots first by leaning forward in the seat to change their mirror view, then by turning their head.

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3. 15-Passenger vans are not allowed to travel in the high-speed lanes or in High Occupancy Vehicle HOV (HOV) lanes.
4. All vehicle occupants are required by law to wear safety belts (if available), when the van is in motion.
5. Never allow more than 15 passengers to ride in the van. If possible, limit the riders to nine including the driver with no one in the last row. When less than nine passengers are riding in the vehicle, seat them in the seats forward of the rear axle.
6. The driver shall ensure the proper adjustment of the vehicles mirrors so that the sides of the van are visible.
7. Avoid backing the vehicle when possible. Park the vehicle front end out when possible. If backing the vehicle, perform this action with the assistance of a spotter.
8. Drive cautiously on all roads, especially the rural roads. If the vehicle wheels should drop off the roadway or pavement, reduce the vehicle's speed and steer the vehicle back into the direction of the road.

9. Upon exiting a tunnel or passing a large truck, grip the steering wheel firmly and prepare for the wind to push the vehicle.
10. Check the height of the van prior to entering parking decks or garages.
11. Never allow the carrying of cargo on the roof racks.
12. Ensure the proper inflation of all tires.
13. The vehicle driver shall use the four-second following distance rule between the van and the rear of the vehicle ahead of them. This is done by starting to count when you see the rear bumper of the vehicle ahead of you pass a fixed object

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such as a signpost. Count one-one thousand, two-one thousand, three-one thousand, and four-one thousand. Your vehicle should not reach the fixed object before you reach the count of four-one thousand. If you do, decrease the speed of the vehicle, and increase the distance until you can count to "four-one thousand" before reaching the fixed object.

- D. This procedure will be communicated to employees during driver safety training and through normal management/supervisory channels and added to unit Post Orders.