Operating 15-passenger Vans—Risk versus Reward

For many public gardens there are times when you need to transport larger groups; whether that be a tour to local gardens, attending a conference, shuttling staff around your facilities or use for a summer day camps. Often an economical option is to rent or use a 15-passenger van. However, they also carry unique risks that can be potentially deadly without proper precautions in place. In fact, recent research from the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration found that 15-passenger vans are more likely to be involved in single-vehicle rollover crashes—accidents that result in a vehicle being tipped on its side or roof—than other types of vehicles.

With this in mind, it’s crucial for your organization to understand the steps to identify and mitigate the risks that come with operating 15-passenger vans. Review the following guidance for an outline of common hazards associated with 15-passenger vans and safe driving practices you can implement to avoid these hazards.

Common Hazards of 15-passenger Vans

15 passenger vans come with several hazards that can put both passengers and drivers at risk. Some of the most common hazards associated with 15-passenger vans include overloading, inadequate vehicle maintenance, driver inexperience and an increased risk of rollover accidents—all of which can lead to severe injuries and fatalities. As such, being aware of these hazards and taking appropriate precautions is crucial to ensure everyone arrives at their destination safely.

Safe Driving Practices for 15-passenger Vans

If a 15 passenger van is the only option, it is critical that you follow these safe driving measures:

- Have a dedicated list of staff that are trained to drive a 15 passenger van. Drivers should be at least 25 years old to operate the van. Drivers should have an acceptable motor vehicle record and conduct annual defensive driver training.
- The van needs to be at least year model 2007 or better as the newer versions have built in electronic stability control.
- Never allow more than 15 occupants within a 15-passenger van. Have passengers fill the van from front to back. If every seat in the van is not occupied, have passengers sit only in forward-facing seats in front of the rear axle to increase vehicle stability. NHTSA research indicates that rollover risk increases dramatically as the number of occupants increases. In fact, risk of rollover increases 9 to 12 percent per added occupant. In single-vehicle crashes, 15-passenger vans transporting ten or more occupants had a rollover rate nearly three times that of vans carrying fewer than 5.
- Require passengers to wear their seat belts at all times.

- Conduct a pre-trip inspection checklist and address any vehicle maintenance concerns before each journey, including broken or damaged parts and general wear and tear issues. Pay special attention to the brakes, steering, seat belts and tires. Tires need to be properly inflated and the tread should not be worn down. Fatal rollovers of 15-passenger vans are most likely to involve tire failure, since excessively worn or improperly inflated tires can lead to loss of vehicle control and ultimately a rollover. A NHTSA study found that 74 percent of all 15-passenger vans had improperly inflated tires. Improperly inflated tires can change handling characteristics, increasing the prospect of a rollover crash.
- Drive in the right-hand lane whenever possible.
- Keep at least a four-second distance behind other traffic. In poor conditions, keep at least a six-second distance.
- Avoid being in other vehicles' blind spots and backing up as much as possible.
- Obey the speed limit at all times, and consider driving under the speed limit when necessary (e.g., in poor weather conditions or heavy traffic). Exercise extra caution on steep or curved roads.
- Take all turns slowly. Remember that 15-passenger vans can't handle abrupt maneuvers.
- Avoid panicked steering and hard braking. If an emergency occurs on the road, slow down and pull over in a safe manner as soon as possible.
- Distribute passengers and cargo evenly on the left and right sides of the van. Place cargo in front of the rear axle. Insist that passengers sit toward the front of the van (if possible).
- Don’t overload the van with passengers or cargo. Never load items on top of the van. If at all possible, remove the rear seat as this will help with weight distribution and ensure van is not overloaded.
- Stay focused on the road at all times. Never use a hand-held device while driving, and limit conversation with passengers. Avoid driving when fatigued.
- Make sure the van has an emergency kit. This kit should include a spare tire, wheel wrench, tripod jack, flares or triangle reflectors, toolbox, first-aid kit, blanket, flashlight and extra batteries.
- Be sure these operating rules are part of your written Fleet Safety Program.

For free copies of 15-passenger van safety hangtags, as well as the latest NHTSA research and analysis, please visit their web site: [15-Passenger Vans | NHTSA](https://www.nhtsa.gov/)

You may also contact NHTSA’s Vehicle Safety Hotline at 888-327-4236.

MORE INFORMATION

For more information, please call a member of the BHS Insurance Public Garden team at (800) 350-7676.