



Bus Industry Analysts Urge Action After Crashes

BYLINE: By SAMANTHA BOMKAMP, AP Business Writer

SECTION: BUSINESS NEWS

LENGTH: 504 words

DATELINE: NEW YORK

In the wake of recent bus accidents in Mississippi, Nevada and Texas that killed and injured dozens, industry observers are urging broader safety measures.

"I keep thinking that each one of these accidents is going to be the tipping point to spur progress in Washington," said Jim Hall, a safety analyst and former chairman of the National Transportation Safety Board. "We continue to see an urgent need for safety improvements in the industry."

Hall, who was chairman of the board from 1994 until 2001, said the bus industry is in dire need of renewed and stricter safety measures, including seatbelts, stronger roof structures that would prevent collapse and "glazing" designed to prevent passengers from falling out of windows in a crash.

He said the NTSB has made many attempts in recent decades to improve bus safety, and believes some of the inaction toward improving safety for bus travel is "class-based."

"Those that can afford to fly are afforded a certain level of safety, while those who use buses are dependent on a system that is far less strict," Hall said.

He underscored that the first step needed in improving safety across the industry is the installation of seatbelts.

"There is no question that the number-one safety device, the one that has saved the most lives since its installation, is the seatbelt."

The first initiative by the NTSB to regulate seatbelts on U.S. motor coaches was in 1968. Seatbelts are required on motor coaches in other parts of the world, including across Europe and Australia.

In 1999, Hall said he commissioned a "sweeping study" in an effort to further improve safety in the industry.

"Since then, (the study) has been collecting dust, despite being on the 'Most Wanted' list of the NTSB for years," he said.

American Bus Association President and Chief Executive CEO Peter Pantuso insisted that the industry has adequate safety measures.

He also said buses are the safest form of transportation, noting that the industry carries about 650 million passengers annually comparable to air travel figures and has had an average of 20 to 30 fatalities over the last ten years.

According to the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration, a division of the Department of Transportation, 43,667 people died in automobile accidents in 2005 the most recent year for which statistics are available.

Pantuso said the challenge is when certain small carriers operate illegally, as was the case in the Texas bus crash that killed 17 people last week. Federal officials said the bus company was unlicensed and had inadequate maintenance procedures.

He said the ABA has been "asking (NHTSA) about the best ways to protect people" including improving seat designs, window construction and rooftop reinforcement. He said the administration is in the process of developing new findings and expects to issue fresh data early next year.

"We're finally seeing a response from NHTSA that we asked for ten years ago," Pantuso said.

A Department of Transportation spokesman was not immediately available for comment.