

Editorial: Caution, Enforcement Needed After Crash

Crackdown on rogues, night driving will improve bus safety.

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A newly released criminal complaint filed in the case of the tragic charter bus crash that killed a 16-year-old Pelican Rapids band member and injured 29 other students triggered a fresh wave of sadness across the state. The crash happened on Interstate 94 near Albertville in the early morning hours of April 5. The complaint from the Minnesota State Patrol alleges what many suspected: Eight hours into the 600-mile overnight trip back from Chicago, the 69-year-old driver fell asleep -- a finding disputed by the charter bus company -- and careened off the road. Loren Ernst of Moorhead, who told authorities that he only had three hours of sleep in the 24 hours before the trip, now faces three counts of criminal vehicular homicide.

In the wake of such a tragedy, it's natural to ask whether it could have been prevented. Often, the answer lies in a new law or stronger regulation. Although that approach may have some value, on its own it isn't enough. What's also needed is an extra dose of caution on the part of anyone -- schools, churches, boosters, parents -- organizing an overnight trip.

Shortly after the bus crash, state Rep. Frank Hornstein, DFL-Minneapolis, commissioned the House research staff to look into charter bus laws. What the report found is that charter bus companies crossing state lines are subject to federal and state regulation. Drivers can stay behind the wheel overnight, but the laws are specific about how long they can drive in a single stretch. In this case, Ernst could have driven for up to 10 hours.

Law enforcement, as well as state and national bus industry groups, believe that's a reasonable stretch of time, though it means that relief drivers are needed for extended trips. That's a practice many companies follow, as did Richards Transportation Service on the tragic trip. Ernst was one of four drivers who went with the two buses carrying the Pelican Rapids band.

The trouble is that so-called "rogue operators" in the bus industry underbid other companies by not having relief drivers and by pushing the limits of allowed time on the road. Both the Minnesota Charter Bus Operator's Association and the American Bus Association are advocating more enforcement to catch these rogues. That could come in the form of roadside bus checks or more on-site audits of company records.

For organizers of charter bus trips, the Federal Motor Carrier Safety Administration has guidelines on its website for hiring safety-minded bus companies. Anyone trusting a child to a bus company should ask hard questions about its safety record. Another often overlooked question: Is it really necessary to drive through the night? Doctors and safety officials have increasingly documented the dangers of drowsy driving. Whatever's gained -- whether you're taking a charter, church van or your own car -- is not worth the risk.

Charter buses have long been one of the safest ways to travel, with fatality rates nearly three times lower than passenger cars. Still, there's room for improvement. More enforcement and minimizing nighttime driving are two steps worth pursuing.

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