

Families Of Bus Crash Victims Push For Changes

Tom Walker/Eyewitness News -- July 18, 2008 05:08 PM EDT

Washington, D.C. - Government investigators say last year's crash involving members of a college baseball team should never have happened.

"I'm very disappointed in obviously having to deal with this issue here," said NTSB Chairman Mark Rosenker about the hearings surrounding the March 2007 crash of a bus carrying the Bluffton University baseball team.

The NTSB concludes it was a badly-marked highway exit that caused the bus driver to mistake it for a through lane, sending the bus hurtling into a guardrail and plunging over it to the highway below. It's an accident Rosenker says shouldn't have happened.

"That had the appropriate investigations been done at the state level, we might not be here today," he said.

That verdict was expected by families of team members sitting in the front row, including those of the five ballplayers killed in the accident. Those families are now calling for seat belts aboard all commercial buses.

"Accidents will occur, HOV lanes can be corrected," said John Betts, whose son was killed in the crash. "My son cannot be brought back." Barry and Lynn Mesley's son was injured in the accident. "I don't ever want another mother to get a phone call like we got on that morning, March 2," Lynn Mesley said.

The families got no argument from the safety board, which first recommended seat belts on buses 40 years ago. But federal regulations have gone nowhere and bus operators insist they are already the safest form of transportation.

"We really don't know what the answer is," said Peter Pantuso of the American Bus Association. "Safety includes a number of factors. It may include seat belts, it may include seat design, it may include windows."

Families of accident victims are backing a bill in Congress aimed at making seat belts a life-saving legacy of the Bluffton tragedy. The NTSB, which can only make recommendations, is also calling for trip data recorders aboard inter-city bus lines.