

Families sue over church van deaths: Five youth killed in rollover

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The estates of five young people killed in a single-vehicle “church van” rollover accident last year have sued Ford Motor Company and Enterprise Rent-A-Car, claiming that Ford was negligent in manufacturing its Econoline E-350 15-passenger van and that Enterprise knew the vans are dangerous.

Calling the 2002 Econoline E-350 “a death trap waiting to happen,” plaintiffs’ attorney Brian Panish said inexperienced drivers and full loads increase chances that such vans—often called “church vans” because of their popularity with religious groups—will roll over.

Ford has made changes to its 2006 model vans designed to provide more stability when sensors detect unusual side-to-side movement, but the company said in a statement, “We remain confident that this is a very safe vehicle.” Earlier this year, Ford reached a confidential settlement with the families of three young American missionaries who died in an Econoline 350 rollover crash near Monterrey, Mexico, in June 2002.

The National Transportation Safety Board said in 2002 that the center of gravity of 15-passenger vehicles rises when the van carries more than ten passengers, making rollovers more likely. Because of this finding, the NTSB recommended in July 2003 that Ford strengthen the roofs of its 15-passenger vans and provide more safety belts. The NTSB also called for training Econoline drivers to better maneuver in emergency situations.

The current suit, filed in Alameda Superior Court in California, stems from an accident in Yermo, California, between Los Angeles and Las Vegas. Early on March 29, 2003, a van carrying 14 young adults to a religious retreat rolled over on a highway, killing five passengers. The group had gathered at St. Antonius Coptic Church in northern California the previous day and set out on the 400-mile trek south, crashing into the median. The van’s driver, Peter Demian, had been awake for

19 straight hours at the time of the accident, said the California Highway Patrol. –
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