

Defective 15-Passenger Vans

More than 600 people have died in 15-passenger van rollovers since 2001 and despite decades of government warnings, many churches across the country continue to use these vans. While most automakers have stopped producing the vehicles or redesigned them by adding safety features, there are still about 600,000 15-passenger vans on the road today, according to the Insurance Institute for Highway Safety. The federal government issued a report in 2001 that acknowledged the vans' center of gravity shifts up and to the rear when the vehicle is fully loaded, increasing the chances of a rollover. To date there have been no recalls issued for these vans.

A 15-passenger church van accident in August, 2018 in Missouri that left three teenagers dead, is raising alarms about the failure of federal regulators to protect people from these dangerous vehicles. GB&W's Christine Spagnoli told [KPSR](#) that despite the warnings issued over the past several years, the vans will stay on the roads. "The manufactures of these vehicles have basically decided it's probably cheaper to deal with the lawsuits then pay people as they happen than to pull them off the market," said Spagnoli.

In a [KSHB](#) story, Ms. Spagnoli explained how the vans are inherently unstable: "the more people you put in them, the more difficult they are to control for the driver because the center of gravity moves up and rearward," Spagnoli said. According to the crash report, eight of the 13 people on the Faith Chapel van were not wearing seatbelts, including the three teens who died. "People get in them, and they don't think they need to wear seatbelts in buses, and many buses don't have seatbelts anyway," Spagnoli said.

The [Courier-Journal](#) drew parallels between past church van accidents and Ms. Spagnoli's resolved lawsuit involving Michalanne Salliotte who died in 2004 in the same make and model 15-passenger van which flipped after a tire blow-out on a Florida highway while on a church-sponsored road trip.

\$25.9 million Jury Verdict in Deadly Church Van Rollover Trial

As co-lead trial counsel, Christine Spagnoli obtained a \$25.9 million jury verdict against Ford Motor Company and the First Baptist Church of New Port Richey for the wrongful death of a 44-year-old wife and mother of



four. Michalanne Salliotte died on February 21, 2014 when a church van full of people heading to a youth camp in Georgia crashed in North Florida.

Two people, including Salliotte, died and eight other people suffered injuries. While heading north on Interstate 75 in Lake City, the tread separated from the left rear tire, causing the 2002 E-350 Ford to rollover, ejecting four people. Salliotte's surviving husband, Jeff, and their four children sued Ford for defectively designing its vehicle with an extra row of seats without dual rear tires, making the van unstable and susceptible to loss of control.

Michalanne, who was unbelted, was ejected in the rollover. The plaintiffs claimed that the seatbelts were defectively designed and were inaccessible because the buckles fell under the bench seats. The attorneys also argued that the First Baptist Church negligently maintained the van and had a responsibility to ensure that the seatbelts were accessible to van occupants.

\$73 Million Verdict Against Ford Motor Company

In one of her career defining victories, Christine Spagnoli sued the Ford Motor Company on behalf of the victims of a rollover crash involving an E350 15 passenger van. As co-lead counsel, she secured a \$73 million verdict (including \$50 million in punitive damages) for the family of the driver and an injured passenger. The jury found that the 15 passenger vans were dangerously defective and susceptible to loss of control from a tread separation.