

Jackson Lee wants to boost bus safety

Weeks after Sherman crash, Houston congresswoman unveils plans for legislation that would criminalize negligent drivers

By JENNIFER LEAHY Copyright 2008 Houston Chronicle

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Flanked by Vietnamese community members who wore white bands on their heads to signify the recent deaths in their family, U.S. Rep. Sheila Jackson Lee announced plans Saturday to push for legislation that could mean jail time for bus drivers and company owners who are negligent or reckless.

"There's something about telling people they'll go to jail that gets their attention," said Jackson Lee, D-Houston.

The proposal comes on the heels of the Aug. 8 crash in Sherman that killed 17 members of Houston's Vietnamese Catholic community. While not yet penned, Jackson Lee said she envisions 10 years incarceration and fines of up to \$100,000 for bus drivers and owners who fail to adhere to federal safety guidelines.

"This community has suffered enough and to tell them there are no laws in place is a double tragedy," Jackson Lee said.

Violations would include failing to regularly test drivers and putting passengers on buses with conspicuous neglect. Drivers could also be punished for excessive speeding, driving under the influence and other repeat violations.

The congresswoman also vowed to support the Motorcoach Enhanced Safety Act, legislation proposed last fall by Sens. Kay Bailey Hutchison, R-Texas, and Sherrod Brown, D-Ohio, that also pushed for safety and oversight advances. That legislation would also mandate better training of operators to protect passengers from death and injury due to ejection, rollover and fires.

Lessons from tragedy

Jackson Lee said her proposed Interstate Bus Safety and Security Act of 2008 will "give teeth" to the Senate's legislation.

"How can you violate federal law, cause injury and death and have no consequences?" said Jackson Lee, chairwoman of the House Homeland Security Subcommittee on Transportation Security and Infrastructure Protection.

Community members said the legislation is overdue.

"We have learned something from this tragedy — that the proper law is not out there," said Al Hoang, spokesman for the Houston-area Vietnamese community.

"But we also need to have enforcement."

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Hoang said the lack of significant penalties has compounded the distress and has meant that victims are not eligible for state or federal victim compensation funds.

Many are grappling with the financial repercussions of the accident while trying to heal, Hoang said.

Peter Pham stood quietly, nodding subtly, as Jackson Lee made the announcement.

His mother remains hospitalized. Though she's begun to heal physically, memories of seeing a fellow passenger decapitated during the crash haunt her, he said.

Bich Ngoc Tran also mourns her sister and mother — Cham Nguyen and Catherine Tran — who were seated in front of her at the time of the crash. The three women were very close and traveled to the religious festival in Carthage, Mo., together every year, Pham said.

He said his family will "never be the same."

Mandatory seat belts urged

Attorney Rob Ammons, who is representing Pham and three other families who lost relatives in lawsuits against the bus manufacturer, owner and driver, asked that the tragedy be used for the benefit of others.

Ammons advocated mandatory seat belts, saying that most of the damage was done in this accident because victims were thrown out of the

bus. Seat belts, he said, would have saved many lives.

"It is critically important to note that the vast majority of survival space was maintained," Ammons said. "This is not a golf cart. It's a large vehicle traveling 70 mph down the highway. Let's give people some belts."

The preliminary investigation indicates a retreaded front tire blew out, causing the bus to smash through a guardrail, plunge from a bridge and roll down an embankment.

Operator Iguala Busmex was never licensed to operate in Texas or any other state. The company was created this summer after a federal agency shut down owner Angel de la Torre's other bus company, Angel Tours, because of problems.

Jackson Lee said she would also address this loophole in legislation.

"We need to protect the safety of people in the future. Not only the Vietnamese community but all communities," Hoang said. "We need to have action from the federal level."

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