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NHTSA Performs Charter Bus Crash Tests

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HOUSTON -- Note: The following story is a verbatim transcript of a Local 2 Investigates story that aired on Sunday, Aug. 17, 2008, on KPRC Local 2 at 10 p.m.

Local 2 Investigates takes you inside a charter bus crash.

As families mourn for the 17 parishioners who died on a bus traveling from Houston to Missouri, we're continuing our investigation into charter bus safety.

Only Local 2 has video of ongoing crash tests that offer a rare glimpse inside a motor coach as it crashes. The federal government is conducting the tests right now to help determine whether to require bus companies to outfit every motor coach with life-saving features, like seat belts and safety glass.

Investigative reporter Amy Davis takes you inside to show what happens to passengers on impact.

From one tour bus tragedy to the next, we see the aftermath. But for the first time you can see a charter bus accident from the inside of a moving bus.

Local 2 Investigates obtained these videos of the first motor coach crash tests ever conducted by the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration that started late last year.

"I believe that this is long overdue," said Sen. John Cornyn at a news conference days after the deadly Sherman bus crash.

Those are almost the same words we heard from Sen. Kay Bailey Hutchison when Local 2 Investigates first uncovered the safety issues last year.

It's the chorus repeated by elected officials after every fatal crash, but as we first uncovered, federal crash investigators called for seat belts and safety glass way back in 1999. Neither Congress nor NHTSA forced any changes.

The United Motorcoach Association that represents more than 800 bus companies nationwide told us it wants science to back up the recommendations to require seat belts and safety windows.

In charter bus accidents, the majority of people killed die when they're thrown from their seats and ejected out of the huge bus windows. Neither seat belts nor safety glass is required in charter buses in the U.S.

In crash tests, the NHTSA drove a charter bus 30 miles an hour into a wall, simulating a frontal crash. Inside the bus, engineers restrained some dummies with seat belts. Other dummies had no seat belts.

On impact, the dummies belted in hit their heads and knees of the seatbacks in front of them. The unrestrained dummies were thrown forward and came completely out of their seats. The models seated in the aisle seats landed in the aisle. Those in the window seats either flew over the row in front or landed on the floor.

That's exactly how Leha Nguyen, who survived the Sherman crash, described what happened aboard that bus.

"Right next to me there was a lady whose arm was crushed," Nguyen told reporters from the hospital. "There was another lady on top of her. She couldn't move."

The NHTSA is also simulating rollover accidents to test the roof strength and window frames.

We've learned researchers are still conducting these tests this week. A NHTSA spokesman told Local 2 the agency hopes all results will be ready for release by September.

That's more than two years after Devin Martindale lost her arm in a crash that killed two of her classmates. Allison Forman's arm was crushed.

Both feel they are living proof of the danger of motor coaches, but they hope this scientific evidence will now be enough for lawmakers to do something more than talk about the issue.

"It's scary," said Forman. "And the fact that we can do something about it is why we're here, and it's what we need to do. We need to do something about it."

Texas Sens. Hutchison and Cornyn and Congressman Ted Poe said they are committed to getting a law passed that will require seat belts and safety glass on charter buses by the end of the year.

A congressional hearing on bus safety is scheduled for next month when Congress goes back to DC.

Related Links:

- www.safebuses4kids.org
- National Highway Traffic Safety Administration

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