

COMMENTARY

It no longer feels safe on a charter bus

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There shouldn't be a need for this column.

Consumers shouldn't require tips on how to protect themselves from dangerous bus companies and drivers.

The average church youth group leader chartering a bus to a retreat or retiree boarding a bus to a casino shouldn't have to launch background investigations into companies and drivers they're considering hiring.

The level of federal and state regulatory oversight should be such that a customer feels at least as much confidence boarding a charter bus as he or she does boarding an airplane.

That level of trust isn't possible right now in the charter bus industry. Deadly bus crashes, like the one in Sherman that has killed 17 people, keep happening. Again on Sunday, a casino bus accident in Mississippi killed three people and injured more than 30, and another shuttle bus crash in Nevada injured 29 people.

A gory record

In Texas in the past six years, as my colleague Terri Langford has reported, eight major bus crashes — all but two charter buses — have claimed the lives of 58 people. Those are just the ones that claimed headlines. Between 2000 and 2006, U.S. Department of Transportation records show that buses were involved in a total of 118 fatal crashes in Texas.

Many of the victims and their families were most likely unaware of lax regulation and compliance oversight plaguing an industry that allows fly-by-night charters to sprout up and continue operating despite long lists of violations and citations. They likely didn't know that even if the bus operation has been outlawed by the feds, there's no Texas agency responsible for getting the company off the road.

Why these dangerous lapses have been allowed to continue, and why common sense safety requirements — like seatbelts, stronger roofs to prevent collapse and "glazing" windows to prevent passengers from falling out during crashes — haven't been implemented is anyone's guess.

One former chairman of the National Transportation Safety Board, Jim Hall, has suggested some of the inaction was "class-based" since less affluent people tend take buses, not airplanes.

But considering the mounting hassles and cost of flying, more people may be turning to buses as an affordable alternative. A recent DePaul University study of intercity bus ridership showed a 13 percent increase in bus departures between February 2006 and late last year.

If the horror of repeated, preventable deaths and injuries aboard charter buses doesn't prompt lawmakers in Washington and Austin to act to protect passengers, perhaps the growing population boarding buses will.

In the meantime, it's up to the consumer to learn as much as possible about a charter bus operator, subcontractor or driver before hiring them.

There are good, safe operators and drivers out there. Here's a checklist — compiled with the advice of Langford and officials at state and federal regulatory agencies — that will help you find them:

- Know the company in charge. Get the name of the bus company's owner, but also ask the carrier if it is providing the bus or subcontracting or leasing the bus from another company. Get that company's information.
- Take down the company's U.S. Department of Transportation or Motor Carrier number. Check the company's safety record by plugging in those numbers at the Federal Motor Carrier Safety Administration's Web site, www.safersys.org. Also check whether the company has a \$5 million insurance policy, the minimum needed to operate outside of Texas.

Another Web site operated by the motor carrier agency, www.fmcsa.dot.gov, provides information under the "Education and Outreach" section. Click on the link, "Bus/Passenger Carrier Safety," and then look under "Helpful guides," to find a link that helps you search for "safe" interstate bus and motor coach companies in your area.

- Check out the driver: Make sure he or she has a "passenger endorsement" on his or her commercial driver's license and a valid DOT medical certificate saying he or she is fit to drive. Ask to see the driver's log book; if it is accurate, it will show how many days and hours the driver has been working up until your trip. Federal regulations bar driving more

than 10 hours a day and drivers must rest eight hours before a trip. For a fee, you can check the driver's driving record and any Texas criminal history at www.txdps.state.tx.us.

- Inspect the bus. Make sure the driver has performed a pre-trip inspection, but you or someone knowledgeable should eyeball the vehicle yourself. Check for low tire treads, broken lights and whether the bus is equipped with a fire extinguisher.

Doing all this won't guarantee you a safe trip. Inspection information may be outdated, incomplete or inconsistent. But until lawmakers and regulators get serious about protecting bus passengers, it's your best insurance policy.

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