



MOTORCOACH SAFETY NOW

Bluffton University Bus Crash

Atlanta, Georgia

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www.motorcoachsafetynow.com

March 2, 2007



Zachary Arend



David Betts



Scott Harmon



Cody Holp



Tyler Williams

STATEMENT OF JOHN BETTS

BEFORE THE SENATE SUBCOMMITTEE ON SURFACE TRANSPORTATION

AND

MERCHANT MARINE INFRASTRUCTURE, SAFETY, AND SECURITY

COMMERCE, SCIENCE AND TRANSPORTATION COMMITTEE

SEPTEMBER 18, 2008

We, the families of those who have needlessly died or have suffered serious and permanent injuries are here to thank the Senate Surface Transportation and Merchant Marine Infrastructure, Safety, and Security Subcommittee for holding this oversight hearing on Motorcoach safety and the need to pass Senate Bill 2326, a critical piece of motorcoach safety legislation.

I am John Betts, father to David Betts who died March 2, 2007 in a motorcoach crash on Northside Drive, in Atlanta, Georgia along with Zachary Arend, Scott Harmon, Cody Holp, Tyler Williams, and the bus driver and his wife. The motorcoach was traveling to Florida for the Bluffton University Baseball spring trip. Many of the players and coaches were, and still are, seriously and permanently disabled.

David was a 20-year-old sophomore honors student who loved to play and compete. Though David was academically, musically, and, athletically gifted his greatest attribute was his heart.

David had not made the University's baseball traveling team his freshman year so he did not travel with the team to Florida in 2006. He was determined to not only make the traveling team his sophomore year but to be the starting second baseman.

The day before they left for Florida in the spring of 2007 he was told he would be the starting second baseman. David never told us he would be starting; he wanted to surprise his family.

I tell you this story not only as a testimony to David's determination but to illustrate the excitement and anticipation he felt. I was also happily anticipating seeing David play with the passion he had for the game he loved. That eager anticipation turned into the darkest day of my life.

While waiting in the Dayton airport I looked up at a TV monitor and saw a motorcoach on its side; it had been identified as a bus with little league players that had crashed in Atlanta. The sense of dread I felt was confirmed when I arrived in Charlotte and discovered it was the Bluffton baseball team. At least six were confirmed dead and many were seriously injured.

As I re-routed my flight and arrived in to Atlanta, I rushed to the hospital trying to find David. I was told he might be one of the dead and I would need to go to the morgue to identify his body. There I found my son with swollen, discolored eyes and multiple lacerations and bruises.

I returned to the hospital and made a promise to the surviving boys that because David was so good something good would come out of this tragedy. Later I amended that to include all those who died.

Bluffton is but one of many such motorcoach tragedies.

We believe S.2326 is the good we seek; we believe this legislation will drastically decrease the possibility of future death and serious injury due to lack of basic, lifesaving occupant safety features on motorcoaches. The apathy toward these changes is the true tragedy. As the apathy continues and the motorcoach industry grows so will, and has, the death and serious injury toll.

The motorcoach industry is now transporting over 630 million passengers per year, which rivals the airline industry. There are over 3,700 motorcoach companies and over 34,000 motorcoaches operating on our highways. Yet, the U.S. Department of Transportation does not require that motorcoaches have the same occupant protection safety features that are routinely designed and required in most other major modes of transportation.

An average motorcoach is approximately 50 feet long, 12 feet high, 8 feet wide, and 24 tons. It is made up of 1/3 non safety glass, and travels the vast majority of the time at 65 to 75 mph carrying our most fragile cargo, such as young people and senior citizens. The size of a motorcoach gives you a sense of security, but motorcoaches are heavy, unstable, fast moving projectiles.

Though crashes may never be 100% preventable we can drastically reduce death and serious injury by having the standard occupancy protection devices called for in S.2326. Both Europe and Australia are decades ahead on this issue; a 10-year study was just completed that found Australia has not had one motorcoach death from anyone wearing a three-point restraint, which is a standard requirement in their motorcoaches.

Our own National Transportation and Safety Board (NTSB) has been recommending, to no avail, for at least the past decade the occupant safety features included in S.2326. These recommendations include crash avoidance technologies to prevent rollovers; ejection prevention safety features such as seatbelts, advanced window glazing and increased roof strength; fire protection advancements; more easily accessible passenger evacuation routes; and driver training and other operational updates that ensure motorcoach operator compliance.

I ask you, how would you feel if one week after you buried your son you read the NTSB's 1999 bus crashworthiness report which called for the very occupant safety features that could have saved your son's life? Then, two weeks after that, you found out that the very motorcoach he was riding was manufactured by a company in Europe that has made motorcoaches with those same features for years?

There is no need to perpetuate the pain of having a loved one killed or permanently disabled in such an easily preventable manner; this country needs to pass S.2326 to direct the Department of Transportation to implement the NTSB recommendations that have been ignored far too long to the detriment of public safety.

The Senate Commerce, Science and Transportation Committee has a long and proud history of supporting bi-partisan safety solutions to protect the American public. As the legislative process unfolds you may see opposition to this commonsense legislation. Let me briefly address what I believe to be the major arguments against the bill.

First, there are those who believe that the U.S. DOT should drive the change in motorcoach safety improvements and second, there is no need to act because motorcoach transportation is one of the safest modes of transportation.

On first appearance these seem like reasonable arguments but a closer review is needed, especially from the perspective of a father who has lost a child.

Motorcoach transportation may be one of the safest modes when you look at statistics of lives lost per miles traveled compared to other modes of transportation. However, as family members here today representing those who had a loved one die in such a crash, our first response is that such statistics are not comforting. As a father, am I to disregard David's death as his being one of the unlucky few? As NTSB recommendations languish here in the United States, Europe and Australia have already required basic occupant safety protection measures such as seat belts. Many of us flew here today in a plane that had a seat belt, all passenger vehicles are equipped with seat belts and we must ask why has the government and industry delayed in making seat belts available on motorcoaches? The U.S. ought to be leading the world in motorcoach safety, not following.

My second response is that you need to differentiate the crash from the outcome; that is, driver error and highway design contributed to our son's death. However, the lack of basic occupant restraints led to his and many other ejections that resulted in death and serious injuries from being tossed around like they were in a washing machine.

My third response is that motorcoach travel could be and should be even safer. Last year and this year thus far, there were no commercial airline crashes in the United States but that doesn't mean we don't continue to strive for the highest level of safety for the traveling public. This increase in occupant safety technologies is a win-win. That is, it would lead to fewer deaths and injuries and decrease the motor carriers' insurance premiums.

It is not necessary to study the problem further; indeed, we cannot afford to study the problem any longer. It is time to move forward with legislation giving the U.S. Department of Transportation direction and a timetable for action.

The NTSB has forty years of field reviews of motorcoach accidents and NHTSA has recently (12/07) performed simulated motorcoach crash and rollover tests indicating the need for three point restraints.

Senate Bill 2326 also gives reasonable timeframes for addressing safety improvements.

We must be cautious about the motives of those who request more study on that which we already have data. Otherwise, a never-ending data gathering game will occur that unnecessarily increases time frames and places more lives in jeopardy.

This past 18 months a nationwide internet poll has found a 75% positive response to S.2326. I have obtained well over 3,000 signed petitions from U.S. voters wanting this bill to pass.

I would like to conclude by quoting one grieving mother whose son died in a motorcoach crash in Utah on January 6, 2008. I believe she speaks for all of us who have lost loved ones in motorcoach crashes. "Had there been seat belts on that bus my son would have had one on. In all probability he would still be alive. I am very passionate about this cause."

Please help us to enact S.2326 for the motorcoach occupant safety features that are long overdue, it is literally a matter of life and death.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify. I am happy to answer any questions and look forward to working with this committee on advancing the legislation.