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Driver In Calif Crash Didn't Have Proper License

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The bus that crashed and killed eight people on a Northern California road was operated in a poorly regulated segment of the nation's transportation system with a patchwork of state and federal rules and spotty enforcement.

Safety advocates and bus industry experts said Tuesday tour bus companies that transport gamblers to casinos don't always follow government regulations designed to assure passenger safety.

"Some of these rogue operations literally do pickups in alleys where they are trying to keep out of the sight of federal and state authorities," said Eron Shosteck, spokesman at the American Bus Association, a Washington, D.C.-based group that represents about 1,000 motorcoach and tour companies in the U.S. and Canada.

The California Highway Patrol is investigating whether the bus involved in Sunday's crash north of Sacramento was inspected annually, as required by law. They also are looking at whether drugs or alcohol were a factor.

The bus driver, 52-year-old Quintin Watts, didn't have a proper license to carry passengers and the vehicle had an invalid license plate, the CHP said. Watts has been arrested on suspicion of driving under the influence.

Patrol officers believe the bus owner was Daniel Cobb, 68, who died in the crash. State public records show that Cobb was insured and had a valid permit from the Public Utilities Commission to operate a bus service.

Under the permit, however, Cobb listed only himself and not Watts as the sole driver of the single bus he had registered with the commission, agency officials said.

"Mr. Cobb certified under penalty of perjury that he had no employees and was therefore not required to maintain workers' compensation insurance," said Paul Wuerstle, the commission's head of transportation enforcement.

A witness said the bus carrying 42 passengers to Colusa Casino Resort drifted off a rural two-lane road before the driver "overcorrected" and swerved back. It overturned and rolled completely over, ending up on its wheels facing the opposite direction. About 30 people were injured. Many of the passengers were Laotian seniors.

Assemblyman Ted Lieu, who heads the Asian and Pacific Islander Legislative Caucus, said lawmakers were concerned the bus company failed to follow the law.

"We will look at the issues of enforcement and regulations to ensure that we can prevent such tragedies in the future," Lieu said in a statement. "This preventable tragedy should serve as a wake up call to all bus companies to review their policies and procedures to make sure they are in compliance with the law."

Mark DeSaulnier, D-Martinez, chair of the Assembly Transportation Committee, said his panel has requested information from the CHP and the California Department of Motor Vehicles.

"This is a perfect example of where we might do something to make sure this doesn't happen again," he said.

All commercial buses that travel within California undergo annual inspections by the highway patrol, but in cases where companies don't have bus terminals, CHP spokesman Scott Johnson said, "we don't go. If there's no terminal they don't respond."

A bus terminal couldn't be located for Cobbs Bus Service, which listed a Modesto church and a residence in Sacramento as its headquarters.

"Any reputable bus company will have a facility with service bays and customer service lounge," Shosteck said.

Still, the highway patrol told the Public Utilities Commission in October 2007 that Cobb's operation had passed all necessary inspections and that his permit could be renewed for another three years, Wuerstle said.

Cobb had not faced a safety inspection since then, according to agency records, and was likely due for an annual check, he said.

Cobb had a permit to operate a bus service in the state since 1974 and had no indications on his record of any safety violations in the past, Wuerstle said. The commission is not automatically notified if a bus driver has been in an accident, he said.

The Federal Motor Carrier Safety Administration regulates buses that cross state lines, leaving the responsibility of oversight to states for tour buses like Cobbs Bus Service that ferry casino goers and other tourists within California.

Federal rules also require employers provide mandatory drug and alcohol testing for all bus drivers operating vehicles that carry 16 passengers or more, typically through a private contractor.

In California, bus operators also must enroll their drivers in a state program that informs employers whenever a driver receives a ticket, gets in an accident or has his or her license suspended or revoked.

Records show Watts, of Stockton, had been cited for speeding and other violations that resulted in loss of his license for nearly two years. He regained his driving privileges last January.

Watts didn't have the proper license to carry more than 10 passengers, said Mike Marando, a DMV spokesman.

"He wasn't authorized to drive a bus in the state of California," Marando explained. "It is the responsibility of the bus company owner to make sure the driver is properly licensed, and that was not the case here."

Watts declined interview requests, but his family issued a statement through Woodland Hospital, where he is recovering from injuries in the crash.

"We would like to share our condolences to those who have lost their loved ones and also let everyone know we are praying for those who are still in the hospital," the statement said.

Watts' adoptive parents said they were told by friends and family members that the company's operator, Daniel Cobb was Watts' step father. Cobb had been married to Watts' biological mother before she died about 10 years ago, said Cleval Watts, who adopted Quintin Watts when he was six months old.

He added that Quintin Watts was diabetic and taking insulin.

Passengers who survived the crash tell social workers that the bus driver appeared to have dozed off and passengers tried to warn him before the vehicle rolled off the road and tumbled into a drainage ditch.

"The bus driver was sleepy and the bus swung to the left and right side. And they were yelling at him on the third swing when it turned over," said Theresa Saechao of Lao Family Community Development of Sacramento.