

# SUMMER SAFETY BULLETIN

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## Van Safety: *Avoiding Heat Related Injuries*

### Case Scenario No. 1

The residents and staff of a community home are preparing for a group outing. In anticipation of the day's activities, a zealous consumer boards the group home's van early to make sure he reserves his favorite seat. As everyone leaves the house, the staff realize that the number of passengers exceeds the seating capacity of the van, and decide to take two passenger cars instead. On the way to the outing, one of the staff members in the first car realizes that a consumer is missing and assumes that he is riding in the second vehicle. When they reach their destination, the staff member realizes that the missing consumer had not, in fact, been in the second vehicle, and is not anywhere in sight. After consulting with her fellow staff members, they collectively decide that the consumer must have decided to stay home, yet they do not call the residence in order to confirm this assumption. Three hours later the consumer is found in the van, unconscious, at which time the temperature on this early summer day has reached a sweltering high of 90 degrees. Although EMS was called and the consumer was immediately transported to the local hospital, the damage was irreparable. He suffered from heat stroke and spent several weeks in the hospital. Two years later, the consumer continues to have lingering effects from the heat stroke.

### Case Scenario No. 2

Each day, a staff member picks up consumers from various group homes in the community and brings them to their day treatment program. One of the staff member's job responsibilities is to "sweep" the van to make sure that the van is always left unoccupied after it arrives at the day treatment facility. On the day in question, instead of doing a thorough sweep, the staff member simply watches while the consumers exit the van. When the last consumer appears to have stepped out of the van, she visually scans the interior of the van from the front, locks the van doors, and assists the consumers to their respective treatment areas. At the end of the day, the staff member made a return trip, bringing each consumer back home. After having finished work that day, while eating dinner at her own home, a call is placed to the staff member indicating that one consumer had not returned home that day. It was at that point that the staff member returned to the van and did a complete search, where she found the missing consumer slumped over in the van's rear seat. The consumer had spent eight hours in the van in 85 degree heat, and would be pronounced dead later that evening after being transported to the hospital.

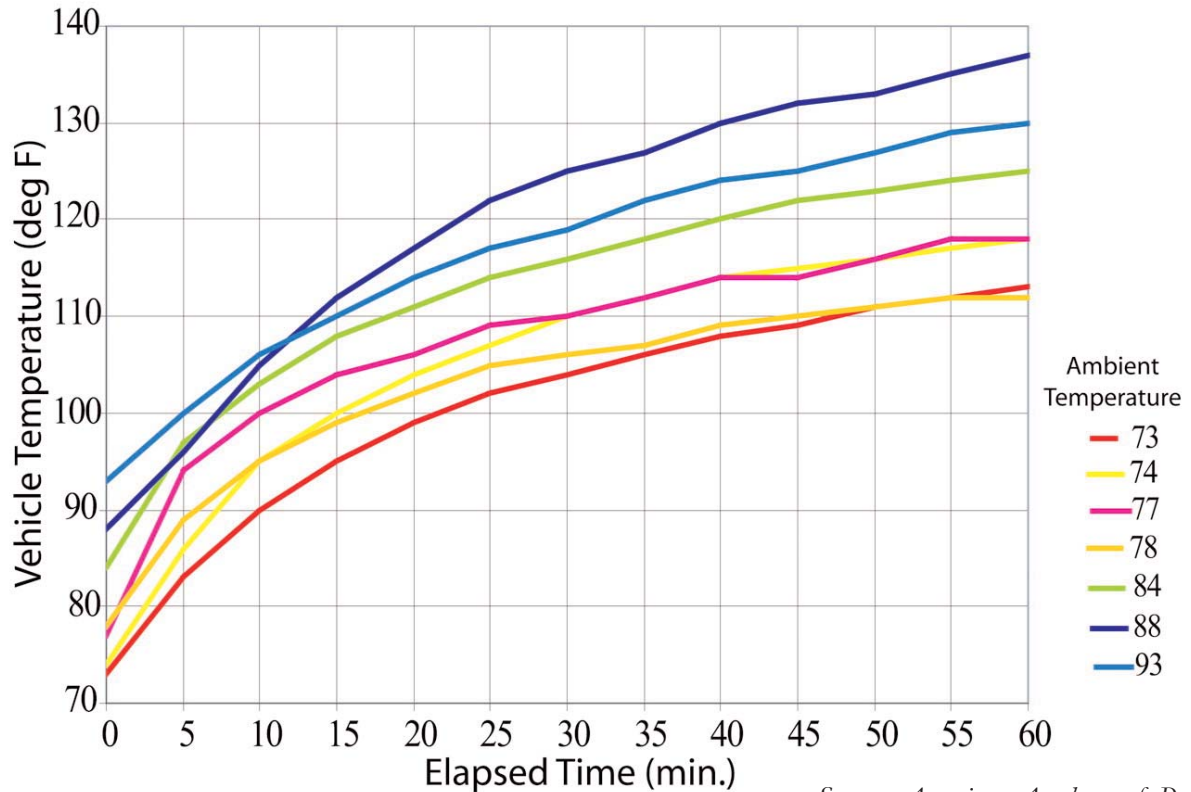
Each year, an unknown number of young children and disabled adults suffer significant injuries - including death - from being enclosed in parked motor vehicles, the majority of which occur during the summer months. These incidents can be directly attributed to a lack of supervision on the part of direct care staff and a lack of clear policies and procedures defined by the agency for which they work.

Children and disabled adults can suffer from heat stroke within minutes, which can be followed by permanent disability and death. Heat stroke can occur when body temperature reaches 105 degrees Fahrenheit. Death can occur at a slightly higher body temperature of 107 degrees Fahrenheit.

The temperature inside a car on a hot day can rise as much as 20 degrees in the first 10 minutes after it has been parked, and will continue to rise at a staggering pace. Even with a window cracked open by 1 ½ inches, the temperature inside a car parked in 80 degree weather can rise from 90 degrees to more than 125 degrees within a half an hour.

# Van Safety: Avoiding Heat Related Injuries

Fig 1. Representative vehicle temperature rise over time.



Source: American Academy of Pediatrics

Most heat related injuries that involve leaving someone unattended in a vehicle are due to a general lack of awareness and understanding of how rapidly the temperature can rise inside a vehicle. Most children and cognitively disabled adults do not realize what is happening to them and, as a result, become disoriented very quickly. In many cases, due to cognitive and/or physical limitations, these individuals are unable to get themselves out of the vehicle and essentially became trapped inside of the vehicle.

Agencies must become more aware and vigilant when it comes the risks posed by heat related danger. They need to increase their knowledge and awareness while setting relevant policies to prevent heat related injuries and death. More importantly, they must ensure that no consumer is left alone in any vehicle for any reason, even if it is only for a few minutes.

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