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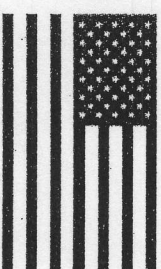
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SPORTS FINAL

Lawsuit filed in fatal van crash

Mother of dead baby says driver and owner are liable

BY LUCIO GUERRERO
Staff Reporter

The mother of an 8-month-old boy who died in last weekend's van crash on Interstate 57 filed a lawsuit Tuesday against the van company and its driver.

Mayra Hernandez's lawsuit alleges that the company, Willis Bus Service, and its driver, Douglas A. King, were responsible for the Saturday morning crash that left two children dead and 16 others injured.

"It's not reasonable for this company to pack the van full of passengers and entrust the safety of those passengers with an unsafe driver," said Thomas A. Zimmerman, the mother's attorney.

"This lawsuit seeks to compensate the family for the tragic loss of their 8-month-old boy."

According to the lawsuit, King was speeding and tailgating cars as he drove a van full of people to two Downstate correctional facilities to visit inmates. The lawsuit contends that King failed to exercise care when driving, drove a commercial vehicle without proper licensing and failed to limit the number of passengers in the van.

The lawsuit also blames Willis Bus Service, and its owner, George W. Willis, of failing to make sure that King was properly licensed and failing to properly train drivers.

King and Willis were not available for

comment.

The van was en route from Chicago to the Big Muddy Correctional Center, a medium-security prison in southern Illinois, and Centralia Correctional Center with inmates' family members.

Sixteen of the 18 passengers were thrown from the vehicle after it lost part of its roof. Eight-month-old Desmond Brown and 3-year-old Zeus Limonez died in the crash.

Police said Zeus was found dead underneath the van and Desmond was pronounced dead at Riverside Hospital in Kankakee.

Preliminary Illinois State Police reports said driver fatigue and speeding may have been to blame for the accident. Police also said that King did not have a commercial driver's license, the van was packed beyond its 15-passenger capacity and the business was not properly licensed to charge riders.

Hernandez said she had been hesitant to take the van to the Big Muddy after being told that she wouldn't be allowed to take a child-restraint seat.

She said she was told Desmond would have to ride in her lap.

About 20 miles south of Kankakee, the van rolled over. Hernandez said she found her son about 10 yards away.

"I picked up my son and he was looking at me and then he closed his eyes. I knew my baby was dead," said Hernandez, who was going to visit the boy's father. "I kept telling him to wake up, wake up."

No charges have been filed in the case, but officials at the Iroquois County state's attorney's office said that could change after police finish their investigation later this week.



Mayra Hernandez
Infant's mother