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- [Equipment](#)
- [Perspective](#)
- [Features](#)
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Trucker in '06 van crash gets 4-yr. prison term

The Associated Press

8/14/2007

PORTLAND, Ind. – Robert F. Spencer, the truck driver involved in a deadly university van crash that led to an unusual case of mistaken identity last year was sentenced Tuesday to four years in prison.

Spencer, 38, pleaded guilty to five counts of reckless homicide and four counts of criminal recklessness. He could have faced up to 24 years.

Spencer's tractor-trailer collided with the Taylor University van on April 26, 2006, as a group of students and staff were returning to their campus in Upland. Authorities said Spencer fell asleep at the wheel after failing to take required rest breaks.

The crash killed four students and a school employee and injured five other people.

Authorities initially identified Whitney Cerak among the dead, but five weeks after the crash, the parents of another student discovered that the severely injured woman they were caring for and thought was their daughter was actually Cerak. Cerak's family had unknowingly buried the body of Laura VanRyn.

At Tuesday's hearing, Jay Circuit Judge Brian Hutchison sentenced Spencer to eight years but suspended four years, which would be served on probation. With more than a year already served, plus time off for good behavior, Spencer could be eligible for release in about a year, the prosecutor said.

"I know I'll have to deal with this the rest of my life," Spencer said. He also must pay a \$5,000 fine and do 500 hours of community service, and he will permanently lose his commercial driver's license. Authorities said Spencer had driven at least nine hours more than allowed under federal rules before he fell asleep before the crash.

Besides VanRyn, 22, of Caledonia, Mich., those killed in the crash were students Bradley J. Larson, 22; Elizabeth A. Smith, 22; and Laurel E. Erb, 20; and university employee Monica Felver, 53.

Cerak of Gaylord, Mich., was 19 at the time of the crash. She has since recovered and returned to classes.

– The Associated Press

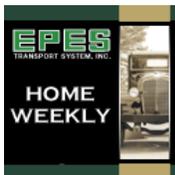


What was left of college van after 2006 crash that killed five.



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- None of the candidates

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