A headline in Amarillo, TX, screams, “Catastrophic Ambulance Collision Lawsuit Settled for $12.5 Million.” Here’s the story behind that headline: A woman was admitted to Northwest Texas Hospital for a psychological evaluation. Despite diagnoses of psychosis and situational depression and outward symptoms of mental illness, she was discharged with only instructions to seek assistance from a state-run facility, the law offices of Frank Branson said.

As she left the hospital, the woman entered an unlocked ambulance that had been left unattended by two paramedics with its engine running. The theft was captured on a security camera, but neither of the two security guards on duty attempted to stop the patient. Shortly after leaving the hospital, she drove the ambulance through an intersection at a high rate of speed and collided with a minivan. Traveling in the van was a family. The father was killed and the mother suffered irreparable brain damage and required several surgeries. The three children in the van also suffered injuries. Besides the hospital, the paramedics were found negligent for leaving the ambulance running unattended and unlocked.

On Oct. 9, 2012, according to the Chicago Tribune, a man stole an ambulance in Berwyn, IL, that was parked in front of a hospital. He drove the ambulance 10 miles before he was stopped by the police. At the time the ambulance was stolen, the paramedics were inside the hospital helping the staff with the patient. The two paramedics were suspended and face possible further discipline.

On Oct. 1, 2012, in Tulsa, OK, as paramedics were on a medical call at an apartment complex, an intoxicated man jumped in the ambulance and attempted to back up, hitting three vehicles. Paramedics pulled him out of the driver’s seat. The man tried to run, but paramedics held him until law enforcement arrived. He was arrested and booked into the Tulsa County Jail.

In Montgomery, PA, on July 26, 2012, a suspect was caught on dashboard surveillance video after he jumped into an ambulance and drove off as EMTs were preparing to transport a patient to the hospital. Responder lights were still activated as the suspect prompted traffic to move and he drove through the red lights. The suspect was able to monitor police transmissions with the radio equipment that was mounted in the ambulance console to avoid law enforcement. Law enforcement later found the ambulance abandoned in an apartment complex parking lot.

Those are just a few examples you will find by searching “ambulance theft” on the Internet. The number of stolen ambulances is up dramatically over past years, the Central Florida Intelligence Exchange reports. Common denominators: ambulances are left unattended; keys are left in the ignition; the ambulance is left running; thieves are under the influence of drugs or alcohol or are psychiatric patients; and ambulances are parked outside hospitals.

Stolen ambulances can have serious implications, as demonstrated in the case in Amarillo, TX, that resulted in a $12.5 million settlement. But there are other repercussions from having an ambulance stolen. Besides the public safety issue of having someone driving a stolen ambulance possibly under the influence of drugs or alcohol, a stolen ambulance can wind up in the wrong hands.

Consider the terrorist bombings at the Murrah Federal Building in Oklahoma City in 1995 and at New York City’s World Trade Center in 1993. In both incidents, terrorists incorporated the use of rental vans to pack explosives. What would stop terrorists from stealing a clearly marked fire department ambulance, loading it with explosives and passing through security barricades with relative ease? During the 2008
Republican National Convention in St. Paul, MN, activists stole an ambulance and loaded it with 55-gallon drums of feces and urine with the goal of disrupting the convention.

Some fire departments have put mechanisms in place to prevent ambulances from being stolen. In the Memphis, TN, Fire Department, for example, a small hidden toggle switch is slipped when a driver leaves an ambulance unattended and idling. If the ambulance is put in gear or someone steps on the brake without flipping the switch in the right direction, the ambulance dies. Some services use key fobs, door locks or proximity keys to keep ambulances from being stolen.

A stolen ambulance is not a trivial matter. Besides potential monetary loss, there is the potential for loss of life or the use of an ambulance for a terrorist event.