

CHICAGO LAWYER

CLIFFORD'S NOTES

TIME FOR A REDESIGN?

Lawsuits over Tesla's electronic door might lead to changes

BY BOB CLIFFORD

Samuel Tremblett lost control of his 2021 Tesla Model Y on Oct. 21, 2025, and struck a tree. The 20-year-old survived the crash and called 911, begging dispatchers for help as a fire started to engulf the car. Responders were on the scene quickly, but it took them four hours to put out the fire. Tremblett died in the car from catastrophic burns and smoke inhalation.

In 2026, his mother filed a wrongful death lawsuit in Massachusetts Superior Court (Tremblett v. Tesla Inc., 1:26 CV 10567, U.S. Dist. Court of Massachusetts) alleging that the Model Y's electronically activated doors could not be opened after the crash because its 12-volt electrical system failed. The plaintiff also alleges the vehicle lacked adequate mechanical backup systems that would allow occupants or first responders to open the doors once electrical power was compromised, despite Tesla being aware of the vehicle's failures from previous reported deaths over the years. Central to the case is the allegation that Tesla knew or should have known that reliance on electronic door activation created foreseeable entrapment risks in post-collision fire scenarios. The complaint lists 17 previous incidents since November 2016 where drivers and passengers were killed or injured after being trapped in Tesla vehicles after a crash.

The suit asserts defective design, failure to warn, breach of warranty and negligence. It also raises issues regarding emergency egress design and asserts Tesla failed to provide adequate instructions or warnings to occupants about its manual release mechanisms. The Tesla manual with instructions for door exits is only available electronically. These instructions include a manual, three-step process that involves removing a mat from the bottom of the rear-door pocket.

While this case is still in early procedural stages, the issues extend the legal scrutiny beyond legacy Tesla models and into the company's newest platform — the Cybertruck

— which has the same type of door release. Three teenagers in California also became trapped following a collision and died of smoke inhalation, according to the complaint in *Tsukahara v. Estate of Dixon, Estate of Patterson, Tesla, Inc., et al.*, Case No.: 25-CV-120058, Superior Court of California, County of Alameda, (filed July 7, 2025).

Tesla's door system issues have drawn attention from the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration. The agency has opened defective investigations into complaints involving nearly 180,000 Tesla 2022 Model 3s doors that allegedly failed to open after loss of power or crashes.

Regulatory investigations do not determine liability but they are significant in product liability litigation. Plaintiffs often rely on complaint databases, engineering analyses and regulatory correspondence to establish notice — a critical element in proving that a manufacturer knew or should have known of a defect. If regulators determine a safety defect exists, Tesla may recall obligations.

In January, U.S. Representative Robin Kelly (D-IL) introduced the Securing Accessible Functional Emergency Exit bill in Congress. If signed into law, it would require inside and outside manual door handles on all electric vehicles. Also, it would make the transportation secretary update federal motor vehicle safety standards within two years to require all vehicles with an electronic door latch system to also have an "easy-to-find manual release" that is "intuitive to use" and operates without power.

The unifying theory in these cases is that reliance solely on electronic door systems can create a serious risk for occupant entrapment after crashes. Traditional automotive door systems rely primarily on mechanical linkages. Even in major crashes, occupants can typically open doors with manual handles so long as structural or crash-related deformities do not physically jam them. Tesla's design integrates electronic activation as a primary method of unlatching doors.



In many Tesla models, the exterior handles are flush and motorized. Interior door release mechanisms may include manual backups, but plaintiffs allege these are poorly labeled, unintuitive or inaccessible under crash conditions. When the 12-volt battery system fails, which can occur in high-impact collisions, door activation may fail. Plaintiffs argue that this creates a foreseeable risk for entrapment in fire scenarios, particularly given the well-documented intensity of lithium-ion battery fires.

Tesla has repeatedly denied wrongdoing in similar cases and consistently markets its vehicles as meeting or exceeding federal safety standards. These lawsuits raise a broader question: How far should automotive innovation go before redundancy is necessary?

Electronic integration has become standard across the industry. However, redundancy, especially for emergency escape, has traditionally been treated as non-negotiable in vehicle design. Juries will be asked to consider whether electronic door systems that depend on electrical continuity are reasonably safe in foreseeable crash-and-fire scenarios. Expert testimony in engineering, crash reconstruction and human factors will likely shape the outcomes.

If the plaintiffs prevail in any of these cases, the consequences could extend well beyond individual verdicts. A finding of defective design could lead to recalls, redesign requirements or industry-wide reassessment of electronic door architecture. [CL](#)

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