



Texas Funeral Service Commission

Recommendations for Funeral Practitioners during the COVID-19 Outbreak

Revision 04062020

Since March 16, 2020, the country has been following the Presidential Executive Order of “*Slow the Spread*” in order to combat and control the COVID-19 pandemic. We have been receiving daily updates from local, state and federal officials on what we should be doing within our employers and families to reduce the risk of person to person exposure and community spread. Most recently, the State of Texas ordered nonessential services and activities to be delayed so that the federal and state social distancing requirements can be enforced. Although these federal and state orders are temporary, it is having a severe impact on our funeral profession. The following recommendations utilize funeral service and funeral service education best practices to keep the funeral home staff, their families and the families whom they serve safe from COVID-19 exposure.

Transferring of remains

Every funeral home staff member transferring remains, should following the best practice of having the identification tags completed prior to making the transfer, having the removal vehicle fully stocked with a complete set of Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) including boots, impervious long sleeve gown that wraps around the employee and extends from the neck to below the knees, disposable surgical mask, face shield that extends from the forehead to below the chin, disposable apron, nitrile gloves and a head covering that covers the ears and the back of the neck region. The PPE requirement should be followed regardless of the cause of death of the remains. The following subsections specifically address the types of removals/transfers made from locations which utilize a body bag and those locations which do not.

Transferring of remains from Medical Examiner/Coroner Office or hospital

When making a removal from the local medical examiner/coroner office or hospital, the remains most likely will be enclosed in a body bag. Please follow the hospital or county facility’s recommendations about not opening the bag until the remains are transferred to

the funeral home or designated location. Each funeral home staff member should place the nitrile gloves on prior to handling any set of remains. The remains' bag should be identified prior to being secured onto the removal cot and placed into the removal vehicle. Once the remains are secured in the vehicle, the gloves may be removed and some type of hand sanitizer can be used in the event a hand washing station is not available prior to completing the transfer. Upon arrival at the funeral home or designated location, the driver should place a new set of gloves on and transfer the bagged remains to the specific location within the funeral home which complies with the funeral home transfer protocol.

Transferring of remains from convalescent/SNF or residence

When making a removal from a convalescent/SNF or residence, the remains most likely may not be wrapped at all. The funeral home staff should assess the removal location as to the necessary PPEs requirement and wear the appropriate PPEs. Each funeral home staff member should. At a minimum, place nitrile gloves on prior to handling any set of remains. The best practice is to gently spray disinfectant spray in the mouth and nose of the deceased and then place a disposable surgical mask over the mouth and nose of the remains. The remains should be identified prior to wrapping the remains to ensure the identity of the remains. When wrapping the remains in a clean linen shroud, use extra precautions not to over manipulate the remains; this will minimize the amount of residual air in the lungs from escaping. Once the remains have been completely wrapped, gently place the remains onto the removal cot and secure the cot in the removal vehicle. The staff members can then remove the gloves and use some type of hand sanitizer if a hand washing station is not available. Upon arrival at the funeral home or designated location, the driver should place a new set of gloves on and transfer the wrapped remains to the specific location within the funeral home which complies with the funeral home transfer protocol.

Funeral Arrangements Conference

The arrangement conference and document signing is probably the most important piece of the funeral service process; without this component, nothing can be completed. The funeral director is responsible for the health and safety of their guests in their funeral home as well as their staff and their personal families. It is possible to complete the funeral arrangement conference over the phone, through a face to face video chat or in person. The merchandise selection process and be completed through the same process. The documents that need to be signed can be completed through a service search as DocuSign or any other verified digital signature program. If the arrangement conference is completed at the funeral home or family's residence, remember the importance of personal space and social distancing. During the funeral arrangement conference, it is normal and polite to offer condolences through a hand shake or a touch on the shoulder; however, during this current emergency, we need to avoid all personal contact with our grieving families.

Preparation of remains

While we recognize that embalming is not required by law, as per the FTC Funeral Rule, we also should recognize that the embalming process of a COVID-19 case is similar to that of any other respiratory disease condition. If a family wishes to view their loved one, we should encourage embalming. If the family wishes to delay their remains-present funeral service, we should encourage embalming so that the remains can be stored in the appropriate and dignified manner.

The funeral home staff is at low risk of contracting the virus through the exposure to the deceased remains. The funeral home staff should continue to use Universal Precautions during the preparation/embalming process. It is the responsibility of the funeral director to ensure their embalmers have the necessary PPEs for the embalming process and that they are utilizing them correctly. The preparation room should have limited access during all embalming procedures at this time, especially since we do not know who actually has the virus and who does not. The embalmers should be using best practices when preparing all cases during this emergency; taking additional time when embalming, not over manipulating any set of remains, using the appropriate amount and strength of embalming solution, using adequate amount of cavity fluid (32 oz per adult case, at a minimum), packing the mouth and nose with disinfectant saturated cotton. The preparation room should be thoroughly disinfected after each embalming case. These best practices will ensure the safety of the funeral home staff and the grieving families who will be close to the remains. The following subsections specifically address the dressing and casketing process of embalmed and unembalmed remains.

Dressing and Casketing of embalmed remains

The funeral home staff should be wearing the appropriate PPEs when handling embalmed remains. When handling the remains, limit the amount of manipulation movement of the remains. This will reduce the risk of exposure to the staff. Utilize best dressing and casketing practices (using at least 2 people to dress and casket the remains) throughout this process. After casketing has been completed, the staff should thoroughly wash their hands.

Dressing and casketing of unembalmed remains

If the family wishes to have the unembalmed remains dressed, the funeral home staff should wear the exact amount of PPEs that would be normally worn during an embalming procedure. The remains should be dressed by two qualified staff members to reduce the amount of manipulated movement of the remains. If the remains are only to be casketed, the remains should be completely wrapped in some type of appropriate material or the remains may stay in the hospital provided body bag and then placed in the casket or disposition container. Once the casket/container is closed and secured, the staff should remove and dispose of their PPEs in accordance with the funeral home's standard protocol.

Viewing/Visitation

The casketed viewing/visitation is a time that the community can come together to share their support with the grieving family. During this pandemic emergency, it is the responsibility of the funeral director to provide a safe and health venue and opportunity for a visitation that complies with the federal and state social distancing guidelines. Any room used for this option should be able to accommodate ample space to comply with the social distancing guidelines.

ID Viewing for Cremation/Burial

If a family wishes to complete an identification viewing prior to the immediate disposition of the remains, there can be several different modalities that this can be accomplished.

- The family may see the remains through a closed circuit video camera. This would allow the family to see their loved one while keeping them at a safe distance from the remains.
- The family, in limited number, may physically see the remains in a private room. There should be a funeral home staff member with the family in the private room to assist them, if needed. The family should be reminded not to disturb the remains out of concern of increased exposure to them and the funeral staff. Remember, that the room must be disinfected after this viewing has been completed and the staff should be utilizing proper PPEs when disinfecting the room.

Open Casket Viewing

If a family requests an open casket viewing or visitation, a veil may be placed over the head cap panel which would allow viewing of the remains while creating a barrier so that the remains are not disturbed. Remember, the social distancing guidelines suggest no more than 10 people at any given time gathered together. After the viewing/visitation has concluded, the entire room should be disinfected including all surfaces of the room and the casket/container.

Closed Casket Visitation

If a family wishes to have a closed casket visitation, the casket should remain closed, locked and secured in the visitation room. Remember, the social distancing guidelines suggest no more than 10 people at any given time gathered together. After the viewing/visitation has concluded, the entire room should be disinfected including all surfaces of the room and the casket/container.

Funeral Service Activities

The actual funeral service event can be planned and executed during this emergency. The disposition of human remains is an essential part of the grieving process. Under the governor's executive order, all nonessential services or activities be halted or delayed. The funeral homes in Texas are providing essential services and activities in their planned funeral events. It is important for families to be able to dispose of their loved deceased loved one, regardless of their cause of death, in a timely manner. It is also important to remember that the more dispositions that are delayed in the state, the more the remains will have to be disposed of at a later date and time. The largest concern that funeral directors should be aware of is the risk of exposure among the family members and other guests while attending any service event. Therefore, as funeral service professionals, we need to be considerate of those who may be inadvertently exposed. The following subsections address two specific modalities of conducting funeral services.

Live streaming services

A possible alternative to having a large in-person gathering would be to live stream the funeral service. There are several types of live streaming platforms that could be utilized. The immediate family (10 or less people) would gather with the remains present or in a memorial type of service. The funeral service event can be conducted in a similar format as it would be if it were all in-person. The live streaming platforms are being used by hundreds of religious faith centers around the country. If a funeral director has questions about these types of streaming services, contact your local religious center and speak with them about their type of live streaming services. This type of service could also be set up at the interment site for any committal ceremony.

Postponed Memorial services

If the family wishes to have immediate disposition, they may plan on conducting their memorial service at a later date and time, so that the community, as a whole can gather safely to celebrate the life that was lived and support the grieving family. As with any postponement, the funeral director should consider whether the remains will be stored in a temporary location or disposed of and the amount of potential guests who would be attending the services.

Interment Services

Interment services are important to this process. This is the final time for the family to be with their loved one. This interment site service can be recorded and shown through an internet outlet or shown live for those not able to attend. The following subsections addresses two specific type of interment services.

Casketed or Urn Interment

When interring casketed remains or an urn, the people gathered should be limited to 10 participants including any clergy, celebrant, officiant, funeral staff and family members. It is possible to accommodate the family's wishes and have a small interment site ceremony, but remember the importance of social distancing during the ceremony.

Urn Scattering

When scattering cremated remains, the people gathered should be limited to 10 participants including any clergy, celebrant, officiant, funeral staff and family members. It is possible to accommodate the family's wishes and have a small scattering ceremony. If the scattering is on a boat or other water craft, it is the responsibility of the funeral director to comply with the social distancing guidelines. This type of final disposition could be delayed until the social distancing guidelines are lifted.

The steps outlined in this document are the recommendations of the Texas Funeral Service Commission. The steps are in compliance with state and federal guidelines to slow the spread of COVID-19. This recommendation will be updated as this emergency progresses and changes. We, as funeral service professionals, have an obligation and duty to provide meaningful funeral service to those families who have experienced a loss of a loved one; regardless of how that loved one died. Please feel free to contact the Commission office, via email, if you have further questions or need more explanation.

Professionally,

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